"Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord, 0 my soul!
I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God while I have being."

-- Psalm 146:1,2.

Jesus' mother Mary must have carefully, lovingly taught her son the ancient psalms of his father David. And why not? That she knew most of them by heart seems certain. She appeals to no less than seven of them in her own hymn of praise. And when Jesus, still only a boy of twelve, was allowed to go on the pilgrimage to God's temple in Jerusalem, he probably spent much of the time whistling and singing the well-known traveler psalms, 120 to 134. And when the congregation finally assembled in the temple court, there was more lusty, joyous singing of psalms.

When later the scribes and Pharisees excommunicated Jesus, he admonished them, and, in the course, comforted himself with Psalm 118: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone," the same comforting words which warmed and inspired him on the eve of his execution. They formed part of the praise psalms which Jesus and his disciples sang before departing for the Mount of Olives (Psalms 113-118). When before the Sanhedrin, he appealed to Psalm 110. And finally, it was again a psalm which passed between his dying lips: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" from Psalm 31.

Those psalms, so profound in their suffering and sorrow, yet so rich in gratitude and praise, inspired him throughout his life. He undoubtedly saw in the pattern of suffering and redemption the model for his own life. How the ancient psalmists grieved about Israel's oppression by the godless! And Christ fulfilled the Psalms, because the suffering reached its climax in his humiliation and glorification. His disciples didn't understand this at first, and after Jesus rose from the dead, he once again reminded them of
the prophetic words of the Psalms. Luke 24:44: "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled."


When our Lord referred to the Psalms he meant more than the 150 lyric psalms, but included other... Old Testament Bible books which, together with the book of Psalms, were collectively known as the Psalms. The synagogue, whose practises Jesus and his disciples followed, was accustomed to dividing the Old Testament into three sections: a) the Law of Moses (Genesis to Deuteronomy); b) the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Isaiah to Malachi, but excluding Lamentations and Daniel); c) the Psalms (the book of Psalms and the rest of the Old Testament).

Modern-day rabbis still use this division and publications of the Hebrew Old Testament follow this order. Christ also decided in favour of this division in contrast to that suggested by the Septuagint which was also known in Christ's day. The Septuagint was the Greek translation, made by the "seventy" translators, which was apparently based on an incorrect concept of the order of Old Testament books. Our Lord remained faithful to the older Hebraic tradition mentioned above.

This is why we return to the original order. Together with the completed New Testament we now have a Bible which should be divided into four sections: a) Law; b) Prophets; c) Psalms; and d) New Testament.

The word "Psalms" therefore originally had two meanings: a) Psalms as Bible book, or the 150 psalms and b) the collection made up of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, Lamentations, Song of Solomon, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and both Chronicles.
The Jews refer to this third section as Scriptures (ketubim). Accordingly, they refer to our Old Testament with the acronym Tenak which is an abbreviation of Thora or Law, Nebiim or Prophets, and Ketubim or Scriptures.

And since the Psalms form the zenith of the third section of Holy Scripture, the entire third section is often referred to as the Psalms. This practice is quite common with any anthology of selected writings. But to avoid confusion we must be clear about the double meaning of the word "Psalms". Our book is going to deal with the Psalms as a collection of Old Testament books, or, as the Jews refer to it, the Scriptures. We'll begin with an overview of all the books, starting with the Psalms, the 150 lyric poems.

2. The Psalms.

"Hallelujah!"

Literally, this means "Praise Jehovah!" How often are we inspired to praise Jehovah? Can we still praise God? Then an excellent vehicle would be the psalms, as part of family devotions together with our children, or in the assembly of the righteous. The Psalms form the most ancient and pristine "Psalmbook" which God's people possess. But it is also our oldest "Devotional" or "Prayer book", not compiled in church committee but inspired by the Holy Spirit Himself: II Peter 1:21.

The Psalms teach us both praise and prayer. And both need to be learned and exercised. The book of Psalms is not simply a theoretical model for praise and prayer but form the material for our praise, material inspired and organized long ago but active and efficacious still.

3. Proverbs.

Practical life issues form the crux of the Book of Proverbs. Questions such as "which partners should our covenant youth select?" "which women are deserving of praise and which should be avoided?" are given divine illumination.
Proverbs, like the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, want to instill wisdom, not schoolbook knowledge or TV-quiz information, but biblical wisdom. These books are known as the wisdom books and offer much more than an intellectualistic wisdom so characteristic of the modern secularist age. The books of wisdom offer wisdom unto life: knowing what to do and what not to do, knowing when to speak and when to remain silent, knowing what is good and what evil. They give insight into people and relationships. They are the compass for our journey through the night.

The wisdom of the poets of Proverbs is aimed chiefly at the covenant youth. When you're young and lacking in experience, you run the danger of too much naivété in the face of so much evil. How do you propose to become wise? By trial through error? Or by listening to the biblical wisdom of Proverbs? Such is the intent of Proverbs. Proverbs is a collection of life experiences, life wisdom, of many generations of righteous men inspired by the Spirit of God. Whoever has read and re-read this book can have the benefit of both youth and wisdom.

It's really amazing how diverse the book is: it discusses restraint and self-control, commerce and marriage; nurture and marital love; work and recreation. It discusses how one can face life and what one may expect from life, eternal life included. And all are based on the fear of the Lord and are designed for one thing only: to intensify our bliss in a life of communion with the Lord.

4. Job.

The message of Proverbs is how to increase our bliss. But you may be asked to bring aid and comfort to a brother who has been plunged into deep despair. Where to turn for advice? Not cheap and superficial platitudes, but solid, biblical inspiration? The book of Job is an example, par excellence.

Job is also included in the biblical wisdom books, yet has a different purpose than Proverbs or Ecclesiastes.
Where Proverbs deals with growing bliss in the spirit, Job specializes in aggrieved bliss, bliss broken by circumstance. It's the story of a man's precious life in utter ruin. How can you talk about that? How can you help heal the sorrow without resorting to the convenient "orthodoxy" of Job's friends? That's the main theme of the book of Job.

5. Song of Solomon.

The theme of the Song is the wedding, the honeymoon, a highlight in the lives of many people, God's people included. He finds his bride so beautiful and she is so proud of him! This is a unique time in the lives of the young and the Song is entirely devoted to this moment.

"And you know, don't you, that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" Paul wrote to Corinth; "He lives within you, you have that temple from God; you are not your own; you were bought with a price, and what a price it was! So glorify God with your body too!" I Corinthians 6:19,20. And that's exactly what the bride and bridegroom are about in the Song.

It was no different then as it is now; they, too, lived in a time of sexual perversion. They had seen the harems, polygamy and prostitution as a cultic rite among the heathen Cananites. But despite the spirit of the times, they glorified God with their bodies and surrendered to each other only the moment of God's choosing: before the marriage he declared "My sister, my bride, you are a garden, but a garden which is locked, a fountain which is sealed." Song 4:12. Only after the wedding did she surrender: "Then I was a wall and my breasts were like towers; now I'm in his eyes as one who brings peace." Song 8:10.

This is also God's Word. God doesn't shrink away from our bodies as we often do. And why should He? These bodies, our bodies, are his temples. And He doesn't forbid that a boy becomes excited about the beauty of another of His temples. Nor does He place taboos on the joys and intimacies of love dedicated to His sovereign love, as the
church of past ages has sometimes done.

Gnostic christians long persisted in their uncompromising opposition to marriage: I Timothy 4:3. But Paul pulled no punches when he denounced them as "deceitful spirits and demons and pretentious liars whose consciences are seared": I Timothy 4:1. Against this stands the Song of Solomon, liberating the young while binding them to their Lord. The true love of the Song confronts both aberrations: pagan polygamy and modern "free love" on the one hand, and the equally pagan gnostic marriage denial on the other.

Song of Solomon: Lyrics of love in the fear of the Lord.

6. Ruth.

"It was quite by accident," someone might say, that the gentle Ruth strolled onto the fields of the well-heeled Boaz. Only it was no accident. "The Lord recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." Ruth 2:12

Boaz's words to the faithful daughter-in-law of Naomi to a large extent sum up the content of the book. Ruth would be blessed with a man and a child. The last few verses take the reader right into the middle of an everyday, yet uncommonly happy, event: the birth of a baby. The neighbouring women come from hither and yon to bring their presents and their customary acclamations, some, probably, just to satisfy their curiosity.

But note how the book ends. The lad born was named Obed who became the grandfather of David. That revelation brings into focus the primary purpose of the book. To the casual reader the book of Ruth may be an endearing tale with fascinating characters, to the believer the book reveals God's redemptive plan to be accomplished through David's great descendant, Jesus Christ. And as Ruth, of Moabite heathen background, was incorporated into the people of God, we have also been integrated into God's plan of salvation through the work of her descendant who became our Saviour.
7. Lamentations.

Do you ever wonder whether we aren't living in a kind of Age of Judges with its covenant apostasy? Do you ever lie awake grieving for the loss of faith among God's people? The Lamentations is the book to read. You will find you're not the only one to bemoan the fate of the elect. The writers of the songs of Lamentation had similar disasters to suffer, among them the destruction of Jehovah's temple by Nebuchadnezzar, the forcible eviction of God's people from God's chosen land and the hardships of the Babylonian captivity.

Does Lamentations have anything at all to say to us? Let's put it this way: does it make any difference to you whether God's people are condemned to foreign captivity or that our covenant youth are led captive to foreign, apostate scientific theories and pagan mores? In either case the heathen has violated the sanctity of the covenant boundaries. How much irreparable damage has been caused by the "Babylonian" doctrine of evolutionism? Can anyone guess? And that's just one example. Aren't we just like the authors of Lamentations, grieving the loss to the covenant of Christ?

And what's our reaction at a time when the chastising hand of God is brought down upon us? Do we protest and demonstrate and demand our inalienable democratic right? Or do we emulate the profound humility of this pointedly relevant book of Lamentations?

Lamentations: Commentary on the ruin of God's covenant community.

8. Ecclesiastes.

Do you go to work every morning? Or are you perhaps a housewife? In either case, no doubt you've asked yourself the question: what's it all about? What's the point? It's like the assembly-line: you finish one and there's another and another and.... I feel like I'm on a treadmill.
I'm not getting anywhere. It's all for nothing. This isn't work, it's slavery!

Reading Ecclesiastes will probably give you the necessary shot in the arm. It is also a wisdom book, just like Proverbs and Job. The Preacher has carefully scrutinized every aspect of human life, but especially that of work. And in his context, working is more like slaving, so that anyone who feels he's caught up in the fruitless exercise of going around in meaningless circles should benefit from the incisive wisdom of the book.

The preacher was deeply touched by the vanity of man's life, particularly his "slaving." "What does man gain by all the toil by which he toils under the sun?"

This is pretty straightforward, honest stuff. It should speak especially to the young among us. They expect so much from life. They tend to get so caught up in life. And the Preacher is not about to discourage that: "Rejoice, 0 young man, in your youth and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth...." Ecclesiastes 11:9. "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love...." Ecclesiastes 9:9. Because life is vanity, that is, it's gone before you know it. This is just one of the biblical arts of life illustrated by the Preacher.

Ecclesiastes: wisdom, especially in the seeming folly of pointless labour.


The scenario: an exotic garden party at the royal courts of the Persian ruler. A drunken oriental despot wants to put his beautiful wife on public display. To everyone's consternation, she adamantly refuses. Her impudence and sacrilege promptly cost her the crown and her privileged position. Chamberlains are ordered forthwith to collect the most stunningly beautiful girls of the realm to compete for the favour of the king. Object: to succeed Vasthi at the king's right hand.

You will search in vain for the name of God in this book. But the believer will instantly see the hand of God busy manipulating the apparent "coincidences" into a
grand design. It only seems a "coincidence" that Esther becomes the frontrunner in the harem. Furthermore, it is Esther, from among all the nations' beauties, who gains the sympathy of Hegai, the king's chief eunuch. Coincidence? No one discovers that she is a Jewess. A curious coincidence perhaps? And while the fanatical Jew-baiter, Haman, rises to unprecedented power in the realm, king Ahasuerus falls hopelessly in love with Esther! What a coincidence! And Esther becomes Queen Esther!

But there are more wondrous coincidences for the unsuspecting reader: two figures conspire in secret to assassinate king Ahasuerus but someone learns of the plot. Who? Mordecai the Jew. By way of Esther he warns the king. And while it's a rule that any who enters the presence of the king will be put to death instantly, Esther is the singular exception. Strange coincidence indeed! By this time Haman had cast the die for the Final Solution of the Jewish people. But, strangely enough, the king cannot sleep that night. He instructs someone to read him a passage from the royal chronicles, and the reader, quite unwittingly, reads about the aborted attempt on the king's life which had been frustrated by Mordecai!

The point is clear: there was a sequence of seemingly inconspicuous events which, if considered in isolation, might easily be described as "coincidental". When considered in their integrated totality, however, the spectable reveals the epic struggle between the seed of the woman and the henchmen of Satan: Genesis 3:15. The fate of Israel seemed sealed, its doom assured. Haman had confidently set the date for the mass executions. But Jehovah shattered his illusions through the unlikely intercession of a low-born, if courageous, daughter of Judah. But what about Esther? Esther was destined to grind out her days in the harem of the mighty Ahasuerus. But, like the books of Job and Ruth, and, for that matter, all others, the focus, the central concentration point, is God and the coming of his kingdom in Jesus Christ.
10. Daniel.

When Daniel, only fourteen years old, was deported to Babel, the days of Judah’s independence were numbered. Once it was lost, it would never be regained. Judah thereafter was doomed to live under the oppressive domination of various successive superpowers.

Daniel’s time was a time of new challenge and new relationships for Israel. The neutral observer would undoubtedly conclude that Israel had no future, that it was permanently locked into this vast expanse of Babylonian and Medo-Persian territory and that it was destined to spend its days as a small ethnic minority of second-class citizens in a world of cultural and religious hostility.

Had these superpowers indeed succeeded in robbing Israel of her ideals? It was to Daniel, during these dark days of exile, that the Spirit of God came to deliver his message of reassurance.

The men of the Septuagint placed Daniel between Ezekiel and Hosea, the prophetic part of the Old Testament. But originally it was in part III, the Psalms or Scriptures. Daniel is indeed a different book, more akin to the Revelation of John than to the Prophets. Daniel is a book of the future, intended as a ray of light, a beacon, for following generations.

Holy Scripture contains two books of the Future. Both were given by God at a time when God’s promises for a kingdom of peace seemed jeopardized by imposing hostile superpowers. The first Apocalypse came to the aging exile, Daniel, when God’s people were suffering under the yoke of the Medo-Persians. The second came to the aging exile, John, when God’s people, groaned under the yoke of the Romans. Both were books of Comfort, given as proof to the people of God’s steadfast faithfulness and as an assurance of the ultimate victory, victory even over the hideous beasts which would emerge in time to come from the many races of mankind.
But which means would God choose to effect this ultimate victory? And what should be the reaction of the faithful to these supernations? That of the proud Maccabean resistance fighter, or that of the humble Daniel and his companions? God’s kingdom is not of this world and cannot be established by the sword. According to Daniel 2, God’s kingdom will be as the stone “not cut by human hands,” which will pulverize the powers of this world.

Daniel and his friends are the model for our attitudes towards those powers. Loyal to the authority given to these powers by God, Daniel remained obedient to his God. Their faith and God’s restraining hand on the excesses of these worldly regimes can teach us the necessary patience; Revelation 13:10: “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.”

II. Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles.

“What are these feeble Jews doing?” Nehemiah 4:2. The remnant of Jewish exiles had just returned home. But they soon became the object of universal derision for surrounding nations. “Feeble Jews,” what else were they indeed? The legacy of the mighty David had vanished before the east winds and Judah was now only one of the many provinces of the Persian empire, required, from time to time, to pay huge tribute to their Persian overlord, Cyrus.

But the role of David’s house had not been obliterated. That is the thrust of the three books. And the books form a unity, for, while they were perhaps not written by one man, they definitely come out of the same school of thought. Together they form one large history book.

The authors themselves expected the kingdom of God and the consolation of Israel, as did many others also mentioned in the New Testament: Joseph of Arimathia, of whom we read in Mark 15:43 and the Simeon of Luke 2:25. The authors wanted to portray the kingdom of God in
Israel, with David and his heirs as sub-kings. And the pivotal point of this historiography is God's covenant with David.

The chronicler's story begins with Adam to show how Israel, under David, had been selected from the whole of mankind. He describes the covenant with Abraham, which becomes the platform of the Kingdom of God. The election of the tribe of Judah result in the choice of David and his descendants as specially selected family to occupy the sub-kingly throne in Israel's theocracy. The choice of Jerusalem elevates that city to the status of capital of God's kingdom Israel. Throughout, the focus of Chronicles is David and God's promise to him: "I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom for ever and his throne shall be established for ever." (1 Chronicles 17:11-14)

David originally established that kingdom. David's love for Yahweh, who is the real king of Israel, and David's maintenance of the temple and the observance of pure temple worship form the criteria for sound, pious kingly rule. The chronicler applies both these criteria to all David's successors. He doesn't concern himself with the Northern kingdom, as the author of Kings does. For the chronicler, those northern tribes had broken the covenant and were therefore of no account to the Kingdom of God.

The chronicler must have been dismayed at what he had to report about most of David's heirs. Of all, only Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah followed in David's footsteps. The rest perverted their obligation. They betrayed God's covenant with David and defiled the kingdom with the most repugnant idolatries imaginable. They should have known that everything in God's kingdom belonged to Yahweh: the land, the cities, the people, the armies, wars, priests, prophets and kings. But many of David's house brutally silenced the voice of the prophets of the Most High, so that the nation's conscience spoke no longer. Therefore, the coming of Babylon was nothing but the chastisement of Yahweh upon a generation of faithless oath-breakers.
Yet, God did not forsake His oath to David. He roused the spirit of the powerful Cyrus to send his people back. And in their midst was yet another of David's heirs, Zerubbabel by name!

The chronicler recorded beautiful things about the returned exiles. They promptly rebuilt the temple and capital of God's Kingdom. They returned faithfully to the Laws, the constitution of the Jewish world. Still, this new community remained plagued by sin. Ezra and Nehemiah struggled to extend the kingdom to the hearts and minds of the people, helped therein by the order of Levites. But alas, perfection was so elusive! Ezra deplored the many mixed marriages with heathen nations. Nehemiah complained about the influence of the Samaritans and their false, "ecumenical" melting-pot ideas (syncretism). Against this, Nehemiah defended the worship at Jerusalem as the only true and lawful one. After all, Israel had every right, on the basis of its past, to believe that she had the only true covenantal community, past humiliation and punishment notwithstanding.

The conclusion the chronicler reached regarding the accomplishments of David's lineage does not show a ringing surplus; instead, there's a woeful deficit. Still, Israel's greatest asset was not through her own works, but in the immeasurable investment of God's promise: "and his throne shall be established for ever" (1 Chronicles 17:11-14) and "There shall not fail you a man to rule Israel" (II Chronicles 7:18). This was a promise which Ezekiel had reiterated during the exile: "My servant David shall be king over them" (Ezekiel 37:24). Faith in "the steadfast love for David" (II Chronicles 6:42) illumined the chronicler's view of Israel's past to Adam and of Israel's future redemption, of which Jeremiah had written: "Behold, the days are coming, says Yahweh, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land (Jeremiah 23:5). Today, we cannot
read these words without immediately thinking of Luke 1:31-33: "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." The chronicler knew this, saw it coming; the words of our Lord in John 8:56 about Abraham could easily be applied to the chronicler as well: "he rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad."

Chronicles, including Ezra and Nehemiah: Advent Trilogy par excellence!

12. The transition between Scriptures (Psalms) and the New Testament.

In our Bible translations, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah follow the books of Kings. This practice was begun by the Septuagint. They probably saw Chronicles as a sequel, or possibly an appendix, to Kings. (The Greek word for chronicles is paraipomena, meaning "things left unnoticed"). In the Hebrew Bible, whose order we've adopted, Chronicles does not follow Kings and does not even appear in Part II at all; it appears at the end of Part III.

What a remarkable place!

And yet, it's not surprising at all because there is no other Old Testament book which anticipates the coming of David's Son as clearly as do Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, the Advent Trilogy. As a result, the Trilogy makes a perfect transition between Old and New Testaments.

The Trilogy, the History of David, concludes perfectly not only Part III, but also Parts I and II of the Old Testament, viz., the Law and the Prophets. But in addition, the Trilogy is also a suitable introduction to the New Testament.

This concludes our overview of the Psalms. Do you remember the material included in the Psalms? Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles. We can't complain of monotony! Such limitless variety! There are Psalms to instill wisdom unto life; love lyrics; the story of a gentle Moabitess on covenant soil; the epic story at the Persian courts; apocalyptic literature; and a covenant history from Adam to Artaxerxes!! But is there also a thread to connect these pearls or are they lying loose from each other?

The thread is there, rest assured. Only, we'll have to wait until we discuss Psalms 1 and 2 before we find out what it is. Therefore: on to the Psalms!
CHAPTER 2
WHAT THE PLACEMENT OF THE PSALMS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT TEACHES ABOUT THEIR CONTENT.

Imagine the following scene: a man, dressed in austere monastic habit, bare feet casually shoved into a pair of well-worn sandals, hands folded piously on his ample midriff, ancient wire-rimmed spectacles dangling precariously on the tip of his nose, a meticulously sculptured bald spot on his well-rounded skull, this man sits silently, barely moving lips murmuring inaudible words, reciting devotions from his dog-eared little Prayerbook. On a city bus, no less!

Here is a man whose intense religious devotion had driven him from the company of men, from the demanding preoccupations of a rat-race society into exile behind the protective white-washed walls of his secluded cloister, separated, in body and in mind, from the pell-mell, absurd activities of a technological age. He had overcome his natural longings, even the desire to share his life and intimacies with the woman of his earlier dreams. Small wonder that passers-by regarded him with looks of wonder and respect, and, perhaps, even a twinge of envy (or was it simply scorn?)....

History books tell us even more formidable tales. There were those, history tells us, who fasted regularly, dressed in horsehair cloaks or scourged themselves mercilessly with knotted rope and rusty chain. Others condemned themselves to life-long silence, despaired to look upon the opposite sex or locked themselves eternally inside inhospitable cells. Still others, equally ingenuous, shut themselves away in caves or perched themselves on pillars for years without end....

Do you suppose the psalmists were among them? Was King David the spiritual forerunner of our ascetic monk lost on the city transit? And is the Psalmbook a kind of Old Testament Prayerbook, a book for a nook in our lives, the nook of our religious experience? Or is that Psalmbook a book for our whole life?
The answer to that question will become clearer if we understand what the placement of the Psalms in Holy Scripture is saying about the character of the poems.

1. Songs of Sinai.

Where are the Psalms located in the Bible? Those of you who have skipped the introduction will probably chuckle at this question. After all, you let the Bible fall open precisely in the middle and there they are!

But that place has been assigned to them by our translations of the Bible. The Hebrew Bible shows a different place, viz., after the Law and the Prophets. Now we must find out whether that particular placing can teach us anything about their character. In order to do that, however, we must first discover what the purpose is of the first part of the Bible, identified by the Hebrew Bible as the Torah, or Law — Genesis to Deuteronomy.

a. What subjects did the Torah teach?

The Torah teaches three things, basically. The first concerns the three covenants which God made with Israel: 1) with Abraham, Israel's first patriarch; 2) at Sinai or Horeb; and 3) just prior to the entry into Canaan. The book of Deuteronomy is actually the charter of these three covenants. The Torah's second teaching concerns Yahweh's kingship over Israel. The third teaching concerns Yahweh's place of residence, His dwelling-place among His people. His dwelling-place was the Ark. Here Israel would worship Yahweh as King and Covenant-partner through the use of altar, sacrifice and Levitical priesthood.

Briefly, the three main teachings of the Torah, through which God imparted wisdom to His people were: 1) His Kingship; 2) His covenants; 3) His dwelling-place.

b. The Torah: foundation of the Israelite world.

Believing Israelites valued the three facets of the
Torah so much that they placed the Torah on an even keel with God's act of creation. Israel regarded "Horeb" and all its supplements as the genuine institutionalization of the Israelite world; see also Ic, 102 where we've elaborated on this singularly remarkable characterization. There, at Horeb or Sinai, Yahweh, through His divine instruction, laid the foundation for Israel. The Torah was to Israel what girders are to a bridge. They were foundations which could not be shaken: Psalm 93:1; 96:10; 1 Chronicles 16:30. And because of the profound reverence which Israelites held for these foundations, they later came to be ranked in importance with God's act of creation.

To the Israelite, the word "Sinai" arises from the Torah much as a church steeple transcended the lowly houses in a medieval village. "Sinai" was the password to the inner sanctity of the old Israelite community. It was the climax or pivot of the first part of the Bible, and all five books of the Pentateuch revolve around it. The book of Genesis not only introduces Sinai, but is predicated on it. Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers are almost entirely devoted to it. And Deuteronomy concludes Sinai and looks back upon it. "Sinai" is a word of fundamental religious importance to the believing Israelite.

The Torah, which speaks of God's kingship, His covenants and His dwelling-place with its concomitant worship service, formed the pillar upon which Israel was built. It was the foundation of its existence.

And the basis of holy Scripture is still the Torah. Through faith, we have become Abraham's children (Psalm 87) and have been incorporated into Israel (Romans 4). Of course, we do not live within the context of the Sinai covenant; that covenant was since fulfilled by Christ and has disappeared (Hebrews 7,8). But our position vis-a-vis the Torah, though changed, remains; witness what Paul wrote in his epistles to the Hebrews. And as people of God we are rooted in the covenant made with Abraham. We are, as professor Kline wrote in his book on covenant and baptism, "by oath consigned." By oath:
we are compelled to give loyal service to our King.
And the utter curse of God will be upon the head of him
"who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood
of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged
the Spirit of grace!" It is a fearful thing to fall into
the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:28-31)

Covenant hymns.

When Israel broke camp to possess the land of Canaan,
it had the Torah but not the collection of 150 Psalms.
All had yet to be written with the exception of Psalm
90, "a prayer of Moses, the man of God," which was
written during the depressing exile in the desert following
Israel's loss of faith. But it, too, was written after
Sinai.

All 150 psalms, therefore, were written after the
foundations of Israel had been laid at Horeb. The same
is true of the psalms found in other Bible books, such
as the song of Deborah (Judges 5), the song of Hannah
(I Samuel 2), the praise psalm of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38),
the prayer of Jonah, the thanksgiving at the coming of the
Ark (I Chronicles 16) and, for that matter, the psalms of
Mary, Zachariah and Simeon (Luke 1).

All the preceding were composed and sung out of the
spirit of the Torah, the foundation of God's covenant and
kingship. Therein lies the profound difference with the
"psalms" of Israel's heathen neighbours, and, we might add,
the theme of so many "pious, edifying" hymns found in
some Christian churches.

We want to take some time to discuss this fundamental
difference, because it's a matter of great importance.

Israel's neighbours also had their psalms, according
to archaeology. Many have been identified and classified in
James B. Prichard's edition of Ancient Near Eastern
Texts relating to the Old Testament (Princeton, 1955,
p. 365-400). He has described psalms, songs and prayers
of Egyptian, Sumer-Akkadian and Hittite origin dedicated
to idols such as the sun, the Nile, the moon god, Ishtar
and Marduk. The "psalms" of Phoenician origin, furthermore,
appear to be strikingly similar to Israelite psalms as far as poetic form is concerned. Both reveal a habit of repeating lines, though the wording of the repetition may differ. This is known as Hebraic parallelism.

The discovery of the Ras Schamra or Ugarith in Phoenicia could prove to be an invaluable aid in mastering the language of the psalms. The commentary of Mitchell Dahood, who has explained the 150 psalms from a linguistic point of view, using the Ugarith discovery, helps to illumine the language usage of the psalms.

While the language usage and poetic form of Phoenician and Israelite psalms suggest great similarity, their contents differ appreciably. All heathen psalms—and, for that matter, many Christian hymns—focus on the thought "how do I achieve a right relationship with God?" while the Israelite psalms continually reaffirm "we have a good, solid covenant relationship with God, through which He gives us His promises, though, admittedly, there also rests a potential curse" (Isa 313-318, Ic par 39, p.764-807, Id 309,337). One thing Israel was never required to do, namely, to make the gods well disposed towards them through inordinate sacrifices, such as when the Canaanite Baal-priests at Carmel tried to get the attention of their Lord (Baal-Lord) by endless incantations and self-inflicted wounds (I Kings 18). The true psalmist could appeal to Yahweh on the basis of His Torah, the Word He had freely given to them.

The tie between the Almighty and the psalmist was therefore unique in ancient hymnology. The psalmist lived out of the covenant made by God. God's Kingship and the reconciliation offering at his altar were all the psalmist needed. He never needed to be reassured that God was there.

All 150 psalms were conceived and born out of this covenant love. They were created under the umbrella of God's covenant promises. God's Kingship over Israel and his dwelling-place in Zion formed the atmosphere in which the psalmists lived and breath and had their meaning.

Psalms: Covenant hymns par excellence.
At times a psalmist clearly refers to the Sinai covenant as with Psalm 93:1 which we translated as follows: "Yea, He has given the world firm foundations; it shall never be moved." See: Ia, 506-562 and footnote 88, p. 514-516; compare also Psalm 93:10 and I Chronicles 16:30. Also, we should point out that Psalm 93, which clearly identifies the foundations of Israel, also sums up the three main themes of the Torah: 1) Yahweh's decrees, i.e. covenants, 2) Yahweh's kingship and 3) Yahweh's dwelling-place.

***

There are also psalms which lament the foundations. Psalms 11 and 82 were written in times of Torah-defiance. Just before Absalom's insurrection, David complained: "If the foundations are destroyed -- i.e., if the Torah is defiled --, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3). In Psalm 82, Yahweh came in Person. Referring to current treatment of the weak and afflicted which made a mockery of both the spirit and letter of the Torah, the Almighty complained: "all the foundation of the earth are shaken" (Psalm 82:5).

***

Most psalms, however, do not mention the word "foundations" at all, just as they do not mention the word "Torah." But, word or no word, the matter of Israel's foundations are everywhere to be found in the Psalms. In fact, wherever the name of God, Yahweh, can be found is Israel's foundation. And can you find a psalm where Yahweh is not mentioned? The name Yahweh is an abbreviation, a summary you might say, of everything that is essential to the Torah. "I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). And while Psalm 88 may justly be called the most desperate of all, its psalmist, deathly ill and despairing of the morrow, sees the name of Yahweh dispel the gloom and light the lamp of the Great Expectation. "Yahweh," which in English translates somewhat unhappily into "Lord," synopsises the whole Torah in four consonants, YHWH. And every comforting occurrence of "Yahweh" is a happy remembrance of the redemption sealed at Sinai.
That name is irrevocably linked with the story of redemption (Isa, 284). We can safely say that the name Yahweh has been the touchstone of all divine proclamation since Israel's delivery from Egyptian slavery. This is also true of the Psalms. "I am Yahweh" means: I am your Life-giver, your Redeemer, your ever-present Help. That name is the hallmark of all promises, commands, warnings, admonitions, praises and benedictions which are to be found in the books of the Torah, Prophets and Psalms. The name identifies the Covenant God, the Life-giver, just as a watermark identifies a sheet of paper. It was the name God Himself had proclaimed to Moses: "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6ff; cf. Is, 358).

And as such, we can begin to understand why the various psalmists were so full of praise for Yahweh, in marked contrast to the pagan psalmists of neighbouring races who felt compelled to grovel before their hideous idols in the vain hope of securing, however briefly, their fleeting and fickle favour.

***

Why spend so much time discussing the foundations of the psalms? It's simply because we, as modern Christians, so often ignore that foundation, thereby stripping our own understanding, our reading and singing of the psalms of such much meaning. How, after all, can we understand a covenant hymn if we don't understand the covenant?

d) Whoever denies the covenant foundation fails to understand the Psalms.

Why did the monk on the city bus "wear his religion on his sleeve"? Why did he display his "religious" habit and tonsure in public? Why did so many of our forbears
seek escape in solitude or flagellate themselves merci-
lessly? What possessed king Ahaz to burn the heirs of 
David on an idolatrous altar, imitating the ways of the 
heathens, such as the king of Moab? (II Kings 3:27).
Just look at II Chronicles 28:3: "and Ahaz burned 
incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burned 
his sons as an offering...." Because they, and we, have 
ignored the foundations of the covenant. Ahaz ignored 
the Sinai covenant, the foundation upon which God had 
placed Israel. And sanctimonious christians today ignore 
the New Covenant, of which Christ has become the Surety, 
and which must function as the foundations of our total 
existence.

The root evil of this sanctimonious piety is that 
it blatantly ignores covenant foundations laid by God 
Himself. This is what Paul called "an appearance of 
wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion", or a show of 
wisdom in self-imposed worship (Colossians 2:23).
Sanctimonious people do not recognize God's covenant with 
His people. And as such they actually destroy the raison 
d'être of the life of God's people. God made a covenant 
with his people, first of all at Sinai and thereafter 
with us. With us He made the New Covenant, mentioned in 
And God sealed that covenant with circumcision and baptism. 
He is the Faithful One, who has not only given us in-
numerable promises but also the warning of a curse upon 
unbelief. That is the ground of all, but it is precisely 
this foundation which is denied by self-willed piety. 
Such pietistic people believe they must yet become 
members of God's people, thus ignoring the fact that 
God is already their God as He was the God of their fathers 
and will be the God of their children. That is God's 
covenantal promise. Self-willed pietism assumes that the 
relationship with God has yet to be made. And that amounts 
to a denial of the work of God's Spirit in history. 
Such christians cannot take seriously what Peter wrote in 
his epistle, I Peter 2:9,10. Whether they fully realize 
it or not, they incorrectly presuppose that they must
placate the Almighty with their sacrifice of feigned piety. Is there any appreciable difference with the attitude of Baal priests on Mount Carmel who repeatedly slashed themselves "until the blood gushed out upon them", just to gain a moment's favour in the sightless eyes of their stoney sovereign? (1 kings 16) Or with Ahaz who immolated his own precious children?

There is a difference, of course, between the monk steeped in his edifying breviary and the man sacrificing his offspring. But it's a difference in degree, not in principle. It's all part of what Paul called "self-imposed worship". However bizarre or "normal" it may appear to be, it remains a contrived way of seeking salvation. It disregards the foundations of the covenant entirely. It amounts to faith in one's own capabilities, one's own "religiosity" or "piety" rather than God's covenantal promises. And such contrivance is alien to the true christian way of life. It represents the attempts of a supposedly sovereign human being to clear his own way to God, to remove the barriers between himself and God by giving up what is dearest to him: by self-denial, by infanticide, by self-incarceration, by self-chastisement or simply by putting up a phoney front.

Such mistrust of God's promises is a gross insult! Mistrust by His own people, no less! Unable to trust God's covenant of grace or His steadfast promises, these people seem to say: "Why shouldn't I appear to be religious? I'm not half bad after all; there must be hope for me then". Does the reader detect the subtle but immensely profound difference in foundations? It's not what God has done for them that impresses them as much as what they think of themselves and what they can attain for themselves, through their own efforts. And in this climate of self-willed religiosity, the "experience" plays a cardinal role. 3 Pietistic people often rely very heavily on the consiously and continuant active "believing-in-Jesus" for their inner peace and hopes of salvation. But what if the "experience" wanes and the entthousiasm flags? How can such feelings be
restored? By some artificial therapy, possibly some robust singing or a heart-to-heart talk with the self? It's not uncommon for pietistic people to stimulate their religious feelings this way; hearty singing can work as a marvellous tonic.

It's remarkable, too, that such pietism seems to find greater comfort in latter-day revivalist hymns than in the collection of Old Testament psalms! After all, those hymns are more "New Testament," more "evangelical" and "warmer" by nature than the tenor of the psalms, are they not? "Hymns speak to me much more," says the pietist. He finds them much more suitable to revive his dimming zeal — hence the term revival songs. Anyway, when we come around to comparing the beauty of the psalms with the self-willed sanctimony of so many "spiritual" latter-day lyrics, we'll see just how mediaeval Roman Catholics much of this religiosity is.

***

The "experience-religion" favours the latter-day hymns, of which, admittedly, there are some good ones; in the process, however, its understanding of the psalms has suffered greatly. But that's predictable, since covenant psalms cannot be understood if the covenant itself is ignored. However, this movement has also adopted these covenant psalms, but has cast them into its own mold of thought. The resultant interpretation of the psalms has inflicted severe damage to the meaning of the psalms. Following are some illustrations.

***

What has been the source of this "self-imposed" worship of which Paul wrote and which has affected Roman Catholics and Protestants alike? The source was the idea of the immortal soul. And the prime motive animating this "immortal soul" — which, by the way, is a fantasy — was its release from the world. Witness the monk and all such who sharply divide body and soul. But the psalmists had something else in mind; they did not "have" souls, they were souls. Every Israelite,
whether he tended the courts of the temple, threshed
his grain under the hot Palestine sun, sailed his ship
and cast his nets on the Sea of Galilee, or ruled from
the royal throne of David, was a living soul. And it
was the whole Israelite, not just some imaginary,
ethereal part of him, who was living soul. But the
pietists reduced man's soul to that special and limited
area of existence where worship is "experienced". Can
anything be more dissonant than that?

Pietists consider the righteous, whose praises
are sung by the Psalms, as "special people" who had
already "experienced something" within their souls.
And yet we know, of course, that these saints were very
ordinary people who walked in the covenant of Yahweh.
Furthermore, pietists consider it pharisaical, if not
sacriligious, for a person to call himself "righteous"
on the basis of God's covenant promises. And anyway,
the word "righteous" — as it should be understood in
covenantal context — is little understood among pietists,
if for no other reason that that it's difficult to
establish who has had a true "experience"! That can
present problems and it makes it impossible to appeal
to God's justice as He laid it down in the terms of
His covenant, as the psalmists dared to do.

The discovery of blessing and curse running through
entire families and generations, such as is described
in biblical history, was jettisoned by pietists in favour
of the experience or feeling of the individual "soul".
The powerful language of the Spirit-filled Psalms about
blessings and curses handed out by God on the basis of
the Sinai covenant, and which were visibly translated
into a bumper crop or, on the other hand, a disease-
ridden flock of sheep, was recomposed by pietists into
saccharine ditties about the glory realm to be won by
stout heart and pious soul.

Blind to God's redemptive work in the history of
his people, pietists hammered the square peg of the
psalms into the round hole of their own individualism.
Or, where psalmists spoke of visible reality, the meaning
was promptly "spiritualized". The tempestuous seas, frenzied by honest-to-goodness hurricanes, became "seas of the believers' lives", stirred up by the vicissitudes of spiritual calamity. Neal mountains were allegorized into obstacles, to be overcome by the believer.

"Experience religion" has another genre as well, such as the worshipers of the "gentle Jesus". These people have trouble with the vengeance-psalms, because they are supposedly "too harshly Old Testament" and thus "loveless". These people claim that such psalms have been superseded by the coming of Jesus; however, that must have been a different Jesus than the one of the Gospels, because He didn't pull any punches when necessary (Matthew 11:20-24).

***

Experience religion has appropriated the Psalms for itself and placed them outside the covenant. The covenantless bent of the individualists distorted the true meaning of the Psalms. After all, they make sense only when they are based on the covenant between God and His people. Denial of such brutalizes the purpose of the Psalms. Recognition of the foundation, however, places the key of knowledge in our hands.

2. The Mosaic echo in the Psalms.

You may have heard the impressive echo of thunder reverberating through the mountains. But do you know where you can hear a more imposing echo yet? in the book of Psalms. There we hear the echo of the voices of Moses and the Prophets, not diffused and distorted, but crystal clear and concentrated, like a prism. Let's first listen to the echo of Moses' voice.


"I will be your king; I am making a Covenant with you; and I am establishing My dwelling-place among you!" Those were the three surprises Yahweh had in store for Moses and He proceeded to set out the details.
The kingship of Yahweh covered more than Israel's inner life, however; he planned to rule over all of life. That was made clear in the Torah. And all of life didn't refer to all "spiritual or feeling experiences", it referred to their blood and bones, the work of their hands, their wives and children, and even, for those who may still be tempted to make exceptions, their oxes and asses.

He gave them painstaking details about how He wanted to be served: on which days they were to worship; at which altars; on which feasts; by which priests. We get the impression that Yahweh was determined to pre-empt any pagan practices. Clear parameters were established for the worship function in Israel's communal life. The worship service would not be absorbed into a "general religiosity" — as in the case of the monk. And Yahweh impressed Moses with the fact that all of Israel's communal life would be under His kingship. Israel shouldn't nurture the idea it was going to be able to withhold anything from its Covenant-partner and King. But he didn't leave it by vague generalities; he was very specific. Just a few examples of the areas covered by the Torah: slaves, concubines, damaged teeth, injured eyes, butting calves, waterwell covers, cattle rustling, apprehended thieves, grainfield fires, seduction of young girls, lending, interest rates, pawning of cloaks, an overburdened ass, judges and witnesses, recently married men immune from military service, captured women, fugitive slaves, a fence on a flat roof, picking grapes, gathering ears of grain, paying day-labourers, scales of the grain dealer.

Well, these are all things which have little to do with "religious" topics, or at least what has been traditionally called "religious"topics, such as Lord's Day observance, church-going, bible-reading and meditation. Of course, Israel was required to observe worship practices as well, as was pointed out earlier, but such worship service did not exhaust life in the covenant. The claim of the covenant was upon the Israelite night and day. And if he was loyal, he could
expect God's blessing; if not, he could equally expect 
God's curse. And the curse was not simply in the form 
of agony of the soul or such like, but the curse 
materialized in the form of devastated cities, parched 
homesteads, decimated herds, empty burns, kidnapped 
children and lost wars (Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28ff).

***

Life in God's covenant, with the Torah as tutor!

Life in the covenant was the rallying cry of the 
Prophets. Life in the covenant was the subject of 
both praise and lamentation of the Psalms. It's little 
 wonder that the voices of Moses and the Prophets echo 
throughout the Psalms. And it's little wonder, considering 
the all-encompassing nature of the covenant, that the 
Psalms are anything but narrow, "religious" songs!

b) The Psalms: beyond the merely "religious".

The psalmists came out of the Mosaic school. That 
much at least is clear from the book of Psalms. The 
psalmists didn't talk about a "religious corner" as 
so many modern hymns do. Revivalist hymns address 
themselves largely to Jesus, sin, grace, and conversion. 
It's true, the psalmists also sang about those subjects, 
but their scope was not limited to that. They wrote about 
a multitude of other things as well: mountains and 
valleys; oceans and cloudbanks; wild asses and cattlefeed; 
promising grainfields and fertile homesteads; the good 
earth; pastures brimming with multitudes of sheep; 
ripening vineyards and cedars of Lebanon, wildlife in 
the field; rain and snow; sealife and birds of the air; 
travelers lost in the desert and sailors lost in the 
storm....

The echo of Moses' voice cascading through the 
centuries, telling about Yahweh's covenant and kingly 
claim over the totality of life cannot be doubted. But 
there is more.

***

The Torah has three parts—introduction, 
which is Genesis; Bray main theme, covered in Exodus,
The Torah has three parts: i) an introduction, which is the book of Genesis; ii) a main theme, covered in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers; iii) a conclusion, the book of Deuteronomy (Dt 5:1-25:11). All three parts resound in the book of Psalms.

Genesis.

It's amazing how much attention the psalmist paid to the earth and everything in it. "0 Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!" And this tone is not limited strictly to Psalm 8, but is infused into many psalms. "For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth." (Psalm 33:9). Psalm 104 is even clearer about the account of creation; it has carefully woven its praise of God's creation on the model of the six days of creation.

But Genesis 1 is only a small part of the introductory book; its main theme is not creation, but the covenant which God established with Abraham and his descendants. This covenant was the basis for the later covenant God forged with Israel at Sinai.

The psalmists have praised this cornerstone covenant with Abraham exhaustively. "He is the Lord our God; He is mindful of his covenant for ever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant which he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac." (Psalm 105:7ff).

The main theme of the Torah.

But the great events described in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, which outline the main theme, received even more attention by the psalmists.

To begin with, there was the exodus from Egypt. Whereas Moses inscripturated the events of this basic redemption, it was the psalmists who lauded its praise. "When Israel went forth from Egypt....What ails you, 0 sea, that you flee?" (Psalm 114; cf. Psalms 74,77,78,80,105,106).

Further, the psalmists proclaim the pleasure, the inexplicable preference Yahweh had for his people.
"He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances. Praise the Lord! (Psalm 147:19ff).

Next, the psalmists extolled Yahweh's kingship. "The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim (above the ark)" (Psalm 99). "All thy works shall give thanks to thee, O Lord, and all thy saints shall bless thee! They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and tell of thy power, to make known to the sons of men thy mighty deeds, and the glorious splendour of thy kingdom." (Psalm 145).

Finally, the psalmist sang of God's dwelling-place, the third theme of the Torah. "For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness." (Psalm 84:11). They sorrowed if they were prevented from going to God's temple (Psalms 42, 43). Because the faithful steadfastly believed that their God lived at his altars (Psalm 84:3). That's where the priests and Levites taught out of the Torah (Psalm 25:8-12; 73:17). That's where they came face to face with their King. At the altars is where the Israelite turned in repentance. And that's where he received forgiveness (Psalm 51; 130). "What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to me?.... I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord!" (Psalm 116).

Sometimes templegoers cast envious looks in the direction of officers in charge, the priests and Levites, who not only sporadically officiated at a service, but lived constantly in the house of Yahweh: "Blessed are those who dwell in thy house, ever singing thy praise! (Psalm 84:4). Was Psalm 94 perhaps written by just such a priest? (1a 425, 463).
These are the three main themes of the Torah, reflected in the Psalms: God's Kingship, His covenant and His dwelling-place. But the message of Deuteronomy, the conclusion to the Torah, is also echoed in the Psalms.

Deuteronomy.

When Moses, the Lord's official delegate, once more presented the terms of the covenant to Israel in the fields of Moab, he did that in a form similar to that used by other High Kings when they made agreements with their vassals. This has been confirmed by a very enlightening archaeological discovery in the Near East. Parallels can be drawn between the book of Deuteronomy and the forms used in other ancient contractual agreements (Ic, par.35). They contain, for example, warning by the suzerain against oath-breaking. And Moses warns: "Keep them [the terms of the covenant] and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say. 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' ... And what great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?" (Deuteronomy 4:6,8).

Compare this with Psalm 19:7: "The Torah of Yahweh is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of Yahweh is sure, making wise the simple". Or Psalm 119, which is really 350 lines of Torah worship; or Psalms 93 and 111. For that matter, how does the book of Psalms begin? The hallmark of the believer is that "his delight is in the Torah of Yahweh, and on his Torah he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:2).

We could go still further by elaborating on Yahweh's dealings with Israel. The psalmists were on the same wave-length as Moses had been. Deuteronomy, the conclusion of the Torah, and the Psalms form a continuity in thought and worship.

***
It should be clear by now: the book of Psalms is based on the Torah and reveals the same spirit. Both exist in the same climate of worship; both speak of the same God. The Psalms appeal to the same covenant, live out of the same promises, know the same warnings, worship the same King and yearn for the same dwelling-place of which Moses spoke, and, for that matter, also the Prophets.

The Torah and the Psalms share the same spirit, spanning the ages, and speak with the same voice about God's kingship, covenant and dwelling-place.

3. The echo of the Prophets in the Psalms.

Thus, Israel broke camp and crossed the Jordan to possess the promised land. Yahweh was their High King; He lived in their midst; He guided their star; Humbled them through His Torah. And what became of future?

Were the Israelites true to their sworn promise? Did they honour and serve their King with unwavering loyalty? Were the priests and Levites faithful in their instruction? Did fathers raise their children in the fear of the Torah? Did the priesthood observe the proper worship of Yahweh? And did Israel indeed receive the blessing they had been promised, provided, of course, they stayed within the limits of the Torah?

The Prophets give us a sad and depressing account of the subsequent course of events, which boils down to this: Yahweh remained true to His word while Israel quickly sold out its birthright to pagan cults, to pagan baals, to pagan mores and conduct.... Covenant oaths were forgotten, the Torah collected dust, the kinship was renounced, and the dwelling-place, when not ignored, was violated by barbarians or desecrated by the priests themselves....

a) The prophets: an overview.

The general deterioration was not Yahweh's fault. He stuck to the instructions and promises given Joshua.
And under Joshua things went pretty well. But the man was only just in his grave and the treason began. First, Israel refused to cleanse the land of heathen people; then it enthusiastically embraced the heathens' idols and sacrificial rites. That was the end of the Sinai covenant, at least as far as Israel's part of the bargain was concerned.

This precipitated the great judgment of Yahweh on his rebellious people, of which all the prophets speak. And just as there are parallels between Deuteronomy and ancient texts regarding the making of a covenant, there are similar parallels regarding the breaking of a covenant.

When a vassal committed treason and broke his oath of service, the king would not immediately reciprocate. First he would send a diplomatic emissary, with the ultimatum: "You have a choice; either return to immediate loyalty or risk immediate reprisal. You've sworn fealty upon pains of death and now you've committed felony, thereby exposing yourself and your descendants to my wrath" (Ia, 318; Ic, 534, 775).

Yahweh also did not inflict the ultimate punishment right away. First, he sent his emissaries, the prophets. These emissaries were commissioned to deliver Yahweh's ultimatum to a renegade people: (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28ff). He didn't just send one or two, but a whole army; he certainly was a loving and long-suffering God.

Did Israel repent? No; only a few, who came to be known as the remnant, remained faithful to Yahweh. Only a few refused to bow the knee to foreign baals and other forms of apostasy. They are know in the Psalms as the righteous or the silent in the land. Even during periods of wholesale apostasy they can still be found. In the days of the Judges there were Manoah, Boaz, Ruth, Elkanah, Hannah, Samuel and the other judges. During the reign of the godless Saul there were Jonathan, Abigail, David and his six hundred companions. During the rule of the idolatrous Ahab Yahweh reassured Elijah that there were no less than seven thousand who remained true.
And when both kingdoms face deportation, there still remain Jeremiah, Ebed Melech, Baruch and others who continue to fear Yahweh and acknowledge His right to pass judgment on His wayward people. They were the ones to whom Yahweh brought strength through promises of a brilliant future under the kingship of Yahweh: "And Yahweh will become king over all the earth; on that day Yahweh will be one and His name one" (Zechariah 14:9; cf. Micah 4:7). From these remnants originated the Psalms.

During these times of hardship and imminent disaster, the psalmists wrote their songs. Small wonder, then, that the strife and tribulation, recorded by the prophets, form the themes of so many psalms, both the book of Psalms and the broader Scriptures.

b) The echo of the judgment.

Before turning to the dark side of the prophetic impact on the psalms, we should point out that there was also a bright side, notably because of the God-fearing leadership of Joshua. "Thou with thy own hand didst drive out the nations, but them thou didst plant; thou didst afflict the peoples, but them thou didst set free; for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory; but thy right hand, and thy arm, and the light of thy countenance; for thou didst delight in them" (Psalm 44:2ff). "O give thanks to Yahweh...He gave them the lands of the nations; and they took possession of the fruit of the peoples' toil, to the end that they should keep his statutes, and observe his laws. Praise Yahweh!" (Psalm 105:1,44ff; cf. Psalm 114).

But the dark tenor of the prophetic books predominates in the psalms. The crushing blows which Yahweh dealt out to Israel for its treason reverberates throughout the psalms.

While the psalms have their moments of jubilation about God's dwelling-place, there is also much lamentation. Psalm 78 commemorates the violation of the ark-
The throne by the Philistines during Samuel's days (1 Samuel 4ff). The psalms record the flood of the times of the judges, also. But each time Yahweh had returned in his long-suffering and mercy. It remained for Psalms 74 and 79 to register the despair and shock brought on the believing remnant by the destruction of the temple in 586. "O God, the heathen have come into thy inheritance; they have defiled thy holy temple", laments Psalm 79:1. "And then all its carved wood they broke down with hatches and hammers. They set thy sanctuary on fire" grieves Psalm 74:6ff. Those events depict the drama described in the prophetic book of Kings, the book which forms the stage upon which all the psalms are enacted.

The course of events leading to destruction is familiar. The bulk of Israel no longer trusted Yahweh. They preferred instead the seemingly strong but inwardly prevaricating Saul. They despised the covenant which deprived them of the pleasures of intercourse with other nations. They flung Yahweh's warnings into the faces of his emissaries. They worshiped others' idols. They made their own idols. They built factories to make idols. They built "sacred" poles in Yahweh's own dwelling-place. They worshiped sun, moon and stars. And they burned their sons as sacrifices to Moloch....

Israel deserted the Torah, the basis of the covenant. And the structure of Israel's communal existence collapsed into itself. This final catastrophe is also re-enacted in the psalms. And what was left of the oath-keepers? Only a small remnant was left to shoulder the burden of disasters brought upon them by the oath-breakers.... The psalms describe the sorrowful fate of this handful of believers with even more feeling than was done in the prophetic books. The criminal rejection of the Torah left Israel wide open to all kinds of abuses; the foundation was shattered and, with it, the communal laws governing the treatment of the weak, the sick, the helpless and the oppressed, the widows, orphans, levites and the poor. And the
outcast David articulated the gross injustices most eloquently of all. He became the spokesman for the poor, the weak and the oppressed, that small army of righteous who fell prey to the Cain-like wrath of the oath-breakers. Nahoth was surely not the only one who lost his share in the promised land. And his dependents were not the only ones left to fend for themselves. There are so many examples of injustice and exploitation committed by the majority, so many heart-rending stories of victimization, of destitution, that it's almost impossible to list them all. But the following is a detailed sketch of such an extortioner and assassin: "His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under his tongue are mischief and iniquity. He sits in ambush in the villages; in hiding places he murders the innocent. His eyes stealthily watch for the hapless, he lurks in secret like a lion in his covert; he lurks that he may seize the poor, he seizes the poor when he draws him into his net" (Psalms 9,10).

But the righteous did not shake their fists at the heavens in angry defiance. Right in the midst of the tempest, the psalmists, now spokesmen for the oppressed, remained true to the Torah and were led to the eye of the storm. They were the substitutionary intercessors of the nation, confessing the sins of all of Israel, right from its beginnings in Egypt (Psalm 106). They pleaded with Yahweh: "Do not remember against us the iniquities of our forefathers; let thy compassion come speedily to meet us", for, despite the fact that they were righteous, they probably felt the guilt of preceding generations pressing down upon them (Psalm 79:8). They were the spiritual kin of intercessors such as Jeremiah, whose proclamation is echoed in Psalm 79. And the psalmists remembered the promises even through these dark times. "Yet God my King is from of old" (Psalm 74:12). They inspired their brothers by reminding them of the redemption from Egypt (Psalm 74). They taught their children Yahweh's
redemptive history (Psalms 78, 105). They maintained, despite the sheer force of public opinion, that the idols were phoney, spectres created by an apostate mind. They continued to confess Yahweh as the only true God in times when this could spell the loss of limb or life (Psalms 115, 135). And they anchored themselves to prophecies of the global Kingdom of God to which even gentiles would belong. This prophecy can be found in Psalm 87: "Glorious things are spoken of you, 0 city of God. Rahab and Babylon, Philistia, Tyre and Ethiopia I mention as among those who know me!"

Finally, Psalms 85, 126 and 147, written after the exile, are psalms which repeat the prophetic promises for the remnant which remained faithful to the foundations.

***

We endeavour to return to the Mosaic and Prophetic echoes found in the book of Psalms. The above will suffice, I believe, to show that the placement of the Psalms in the Old Testament can tell us a great deal about their content and character. If we're permitted for a moment to compare God's Word with a mountain range, we can conclude that God's voice, proclaimed by Moses and the prophets echoes back through both the book of Psalms and the Scriptures.

c) Explaining the psalms.

The structure which the Holy Spirit has given to Holy Scripture must be carefully observed, otherwise the meaning of the psalms will be lost. Therefore, in order to explain the psalms, two essentials must be observed: i. the covenantal foundation laid at Horeb and ii. the echo of the prophetic books.

In other words, never divorce the psalms from Israel's history as recorded in the Torah and the Prophets. Even if it's impossible to date a particular psalm, never read it as abstract religious verse. In each instance the psalms are reactions inspired by the Holy Spirit to God's words and deeds through
the Torah and to God's subsequent dealings with Israel in the time of the prophets.

We won't be able to comment on all 150 psalms. This will be a rather modest guide to provide you with certain insights and clues as to how to go about exploring the rest. Hopefully, you will be able to carry on with the rest without the guide. Should you need further assistance, there are several good, detailed commentaries on the Psalms available.

We should, however, like to tell you how best to approach a study of the psalms. Without imposing too much on your patience, we feel compelled, as we discuss various psalms, to consider the impact which the prophets have had on these psalms. It's impossible not to do so, because of the ever-present echo and the historic decor. It is so essential to recognize the integrity of the Psalms, Torah and Prophets, so imperative to see their trinitarian structure, as it were, that a commentary on the Psalms might well bear the title Moses and the Prophets!
Scripture identifies two kinds of people, the righteous and the godless. There are others who go by yet different names, but these are the main two.

This is especially true of the book of Psalms. You cannot find a page without this polarity between the righteous and the godless. The first psalm already delineates the two groups of people. But we'll discuss Psalm 1 more extensively later.

To understand the psalms, we must acknowledge and study this polarity. First of all then, who were the just in the psalms? And who were the godless? We'll deal with the just first of all.

1. The just and their righteousness.

"Righteousness" has been little understood by Christians. Luther, for example, quailed when the Bible confronted him with God's righteousness. And no wonder, because Luther had grown accustomed to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. And to Aristotle, righteousness meant giving to each his just rewards. Misled by the pagan philosopher, Luther lived in constant dread of a righteous God. If righteousness is merely the difference between the good and evil which we do, then, indeed, we have reason to fear. And fear Luther did; without taking into account God's compassion and mercy, he was reduced to an anxious, guilt-ridden man without hope of salvation.... But that was before he returned to the Bible.

***

The word "righteous" as it applies to believers does not occur very much in our vocabulary either. How often have you heard someone say "I am righteous"? And why not, if it is true? Because we often think it pharisaical or we associate it with a quality of purity and sinlessness which, of course, no one possesses.

We read about the just, and we sometimes refer to them as saints, but we dare not appropriate that term for
ourselves. And that hesitancy fits in well with the spirit of our times which considers it a virtue to be unsure of almost everything. To call oneself "righteous" therefore, would be not only presumptuous but also highly unpopular. Few would quibble with you if you said "I am a sinner", but, supposing you had been wrongfully accused of something, and you were to quote Job's words "I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go", there would be no end of misunderstanding. But, in the meanwhile, the sharp distinction which Scripture makes between the righteous and the godless is thereby blatantly ignored (Ezekiel 13:24). "Sinner", by the way, is another word for "godless", not a modified synonym for a righteous Christian. We'll return to that in the next section.

***

"... Such a one in righteous".

Scripture is not a scientific textbook of theology. Scripture does not give us scientific definitions. It does not outline concepts of righteousness either, but read what Ezekiel 18:5-9 has to say about the just and his righteousness:

If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right — if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour's wife or approach a woman in her time of impurity, does not oppress any one, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend at interest or take any increase, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between man and man, walks in my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances — he is righteous, he shall surely live, says the Lord God.

***

What does this passage say? It does not say that the just do not sin. It also does not say that they should bend their efforts to do good works, in order to earn God's grace. God has already promised and
delivered his grace through his covenant. The covenant itself was a gift of his grace. (cf. 2:1, d). God knew that man would not escape sin, which is why he gave to Israel, at Sinai, the reconciliation service through priests, altars and sacrifices. Yahweh gave to the truly repentant righteous the promise of forgiveness. The words of Ezekiel concerning the righteous are not words of litigation spoken in abstract legal terms, devoid of love. Ezekiel is based on God's covenantal love and mercy to Israel. Justice is not above love, but functions as part of the whole of Israel's life.

What, then, is a righteous man according to Ezekiel? He is a God-fearing Israelite who keeps the Sinai covenant, as it pertains to all of life. The words "righteous" and "righteousness", as they appear in the Bible, are always thoroughly covenantal. They are words of communion, whether it be the communion between God and man or between man and man. (Numbers-Deuteronomy). This is communal truth. The righteous Israelite knew about this two-fold communal truth.

He had the Sinai covenant and he observed it. This is what made him righteous, not just in the eyes of Yahweh, but also before his fellow-Israelite. And Scripture often equates obedience to the Sinai covenant with righteousness. Therefore, the biblical righteousness of the just refers to their obedience to the Sinai covenant in all areas of life, their loyalty to God and fellow man, their faithful observance of all of God's commands and their good works, biblically understood.

The righteousness of the just manifested itself in the loving respect and fear which they held for Lord. It meant repudiation of idols and sacrificial feasts on the mountains. It meant uncompromising and loving observance of the purity and holiness of worship demanded by Yahweh at Sinai. The righteousness of the just also manifested itself in brotherly love. It meant respect for a neighbour's wife, his rights and possessions, his earnings and clothing, in short, his entire life.
Practically speaking, then, righteousness of the just is synonymous with his love toward God and man. And this is precisely what our Saviour meant when He said: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men in order to be seen by them" (Matthew 6:1). According to verse 2, "righteousness" mean giving alms, lovingly assisting your neighbour in his needs.

The righteous were therefore faithful covenant allies. They were God-fearing members of God's people, who remained true to God's covenant in all areas of life. They were loyal to the Sinai agreements, pertaining to God and their neighbours. Of course, they were not sinless but kept Yahweh's commandments foremost in their minds (Psalm 103:18) and trusted to God's great mercy (Psalm 102:6-13). Hence, unlike sinners and the wicked, the righteous will "stand in the judgment" (Psalm 1:5).

So much for the righteousness of a man, a faithful Israelite.

***

Now comes the righteousness of God, before which the young Luther cringed. Should the idea of God's righteousness paralyze us also?

Whether the same apoplectic fear of God's righteousness strikes us depends on whether we may consider ourselves righteous or, God forbid, godless. What is God's righteousness? It is His faithfulness to the covenant He has made with man. God's righteousness is manifested in his love and deeds of mercy towards man. It includes "all the saving righteousness of the Lord which He performed for you and your fathers" (I Samuel 12:7). Samuel was here referring to the great acts of redemption in the history of Israel (cf. also Isaiah 45:8, 46:13, 48:18, 51:6, Psalm 98:2). Ultimately, God's righteousness, His faithfulness to given promises, was revealed most beautifully in the incarnation of His Son for our redemption.

***
"They were both righteous."

Scripture often mentions the just by name. Of Zechariah and Elizabeth we read: "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1:6). And this was the same Zechariah who had doubted the message of the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:20). Their son, John the Baptist, was also called righteous: "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man" (Mark 6:20).

Noah, Abraham, Lot, David, Simeon and Joseph are also called righteous. Of Noah we read: "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (Genesis 6:9). But he was certainly not without sin, as is witnessed by his drunkenness. Abraham constantly hoped against hope for the fulfillment of God's promises (Romans 4). And how did Yahweh reciprocate? As reward, He counted Abraham as being among the just (Genesis 15:6; Genesis 17). The most perfect of the righteous is, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Acts 3:14, I John 2:19).

The book of Psalms is filled with just such righteous people. It's not just about the righteous; it belongs to the righteous; it is a psalm-book of their prayers and praises, of their struggles and victories. It is authored by the righteous about the righteous for the edification of the righteous.

2. By what are the righteous known?

The righteous go by several others names in the Bible. That was typical of Hebrew poets. They took great pleasure in saying the same thing in two or three different ways. Noah, for example, "was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God". And while the three terms "righteous", "blameless" and "walking with God" may have somewhat different nuances, they mean the same thing.

There are many such terms meaning the same thing.
Sometimes the psalmists referred to different aspects of the lives of the faithful and therefore gave them different names and descriptions, but the subject is always those people who remain steadfastly loyal to the covenant and walked in obedience to God's commandments.

The reader may be reminded of our Saviour's beatitudes in which He spoke of the poor in spirit, those who mourn, who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted. All these expressions depict the righteous, though not necessarily in the sense that all the just experience those qualities to the same degree.

This is also how it is in the psalms. There are many characterizations, most of which vary somewhat in meaning, but all of which describe the lives of the righteous in Holy Scripture.

Following is a list of names and descriptions used in the book of Psalms to depict the righteous:

- the righteous
- the oppressed
- the suffering
- the suffering nation
- the poor
- the weak
- the upright of heart
- the pious
- the faithful
- the pure
- the righteous generation
- the holy
- the pure in heart
- the humble
- the favourite
- the needy
- Thy servant
- the simple
- the good
- the meek
- all who take refuge in thee
- those who fear Him
- who love thy name
- who know thy name
- who seek thee
- who seek refuge at thy right hand against the enemy
who seek Yahweh
who expect thee
all who keep his covenant and witnesses
who love thy salvation
who are blameless
the man who trusts thee
the man who fears Yahweh
who loves his commandments with all his heart
who walk in the Law of Yahweh
who keep his words
who seek him with all their hearts
who walk in his ways
Zion's poor
all who love him
the broken of heart
the crushed of spirit
the silent in the land
the faithful in the land

All these expressions depict the righteous. They illustrate in many ways what a faithful covenant-keeper is in the eyes of Yahweh. They are people who remain loyal to Him, people who faithfully discharge their covenant duties in all areas of life.

3. The poor and suffering.

Although there must have been many a rich man among Israel's righteous, men such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Boaz, Solomon and Joseph of Arimathea, the bulk of the God-fearing belonged to the lowest class in society. That's clear from the context in which we find words like "the suffering", "the humble" and "the poor". Possibly most of the psalmists themselves were poor, although we may not conclude from that that the psalms are class songs.

***

It may have occurred to the reader that the psalmists did not always discuss the grief suffered by the righteous concretely. They wrote vaguely, or at least unspecifically, about enemies, persecutors, oppressors, sneering and contentious people who brought all kinds of sorrow down upon the just. But what sort of grief they caused was not detailed. We read of nets which have been spun, traps laid and pits dug to ensnare the righteous. But there is something indefinite and mysterious about "nets",...
"pits" and "men of blood". The same is true of expressions such as "they draw the bow" and "they unsheath the sword". And while they leave no doubt about the suffering experienced, it should be kept in mind that they were intended as metaphors. But as such, these metaphors nevertheless show precisely what was going on.

This vagueness does not detract from the Davidic psalms. Samuel has written what we needed to know about David. This history is also a commentary on the life of David. The books of Samuel can bring to light many a mystery otherwise raised by the book of Psalms. When we hear David complain to God about "workers of unrighteousness", "godless" and "conspirators", we can refer to Samuel to discover what problems were staring David in the face. In Samuel, we find David persecuted by the sanctimonious Saul and his henchmen. "And Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David" (I Samuel 19:1). This is one such conspiracy.

In I Samuel 22:6-23 we are given a detailed account about the "pits" and "nets" prepared for David. I Samuel 23:1-13 (cf. 23:19ff) describes the episode with the treacherous Keilah. And was the greedy Nabal not a "worker of unrighteousness"? I Samuel 25 can answer many of the questions raised by seeming vagueness in the psalms. And what about I Samuel 25 and the webs of intrigue spun by Absalom against his own father? And when Psalm 55 complains about the mouths of conspirators being slicker than oil, we are no doubt reminded of Absalom's treason (II Samuel 15). He ostensibly wanted to go to Hebron to dedicate himself to Yahweh. But that's where the revolt got under way. Finally II Samuel 16:5-14 describes events with the cursing, blaspheming Shimei. There may appear to be a veil of anonymity or mystery cast over the Davidic psalms; but their meaning becomes crystal clear if we consult the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.

But David was only one righteous man who felt the oppressive heel of the godless. There were many besides. Perhaps David was their spokesman. It appears at one
that "every one who was in distress, and every one who was in debt, and every one who was deeply grieved, gathered to him [David]; and he became captain over them. And there were with him about four hundred men" (The R.S.V. has "discontended" for "deeply grieved"; Job 3:20 has "bitter in soul" for the same Hebrew word — mar-nephesh — and Proverbs 31:6 has "in bitter distress"; it should not be supposed that those following David were asocial misfits, as the word "discontented" might imply; they were people who had been wronged and unjustly cast out). These four hundred were victims of Saul's reign of terror. They formed a righteous minority of destitute exiles. In covenantal terms, of course, they were neither a minority nor exiles; they formed the people of God, all that remained true to Horeb. But why were the psalmists so vague? Partly, no doubt, this vagueness was consistent with the art of writing poetry. But the psalmists also wanted to give the psalms a certain timelessness, so that they could be used for edification by subsequent generations, including God's covenant people today.

However, we should try to discover who, in addition to David's small army, the poor, destitute, humble, oppressed and weak of the Psalms were. What was their grief? What impact can the Psalms have on their readers if specific details of the fate of the righteous in the Psalms is not known? To understand their fate we should analyze some socio-economic conditions in Israel, especially in times when Israel forsook the Sinai agreements.

a) The Torah, shield to the weak, broken.

Israel was an agricultural people. Those who could not participate in its economy were the poor and exploited. They were the ones who had no land, olive groves or vineyards.

Yahweh had attempted to avoid such a situation. He had taken precautionary measures at Sinai. Yahweh had wanted to protect his people from the harsh inequality which was so common among heathen nations. He had wanted
to avoid the formation of socio-economic classes, the wealthy landowners on one hand, the day-labourers, migrant workers and tenant farmers on the other.

Ideally, each Israelite should inherit a parcel of land equal to that of his neighbour (Numbers 26:52-54). This land would be held in trust, as a stewardship, because "the land is mine" [said Yahweh] "for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Leviticus 25:23). Yahweh would be the only landowner and Israelites would be His stewards. "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine" (Leviticus 25:23). The capital would always remain equally divided, thus avoiding possible economic disparities.

But this unfortunately did not last. For whatever reasons, many largely economic no doubt, some were forced to sell their land and enter the service of others. Thus the gap between rich and poor grew. But the gap was not supposed to be permanent. Land so disposed of had to be returned to the original steward/during the next following year of jubilee (Leviticus 25:28; Leviticus ). Also, a labour contract would expire the seventh year, which was the sabbath year (Exodus 21:1ff; Deuteronomy 15:12ff; Numbers-Deuteronomy ). These regulations constituted Yahweh's safeguard against poverty and exploitation.

The prophets, however, tell us a different story; the story of how Israel scorned the laws and thereby brought down economic disparities and hardship.

Excavations in Palestine bear this out. During the tenth century, the age of David and Solomon, houses were roughly the same size, which suggests that economic conditions were fairly uniform. But during the eighth century, the age of Amos, Isaiah and Micha, the difference was very striking. One section of the city was made up of large, well-built villas, while another section had only rather dowdy, unimpressive homes. This is especially true of the region of Samaria, where we have found palatial homes in one area of town, slums and shanties in the other. The rejection of the Sinai covenant had
enriched some while it had reduced the mass of the population to penury. The economic disparity so rampant among Israel's heathen neighbours had also ruined Israel's communal existence.9

These are the conditions which the author of Psalm 11 addressed: "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" With the Torah destroyed, people no longer observed the economic laws laid down by Yahweh. They ignored the regulations concerning the return of land, the limitations of a labour contract. Corrupt judges disadvantaged the cause of the poor and the widows. The powerful exploited the poor and bribed the courts to champion their cause. What can the righteous do in such cases?

There was yet another cause for poverty and suffering.

b) Oppressive taxation.

Samuel had warned Israel about what it could expect from a king. A king would conscript their sons for his army, their daughters for his courts; he would appropriate their fields, vineyards and olive groves for his favourites; he would steal their labour force for his own designs; they would live to rue the day! (I Samuel 8:11-18). It already began with Saul. Saul began life as a farmer's son and ended as a feudal baron (I Samuel 11:5; 22:7; II Samuel 9:9ff). But especially Solomon exacted heavy taxes from his agrarian population (I Kings 12:4). He divided the land into twelve districts which rotated monthly to supply the king with the necessary staples (I Kings 4:7, 27ff; cf. II Chronicles 17:5). Solomon also seems to have claimed rights to the first harvest, because Amos wrote of "the latter growth after the king's moving" (7:1). Under special circumstances, such as the king's favour, a subject might be freed from his obligations (I Samuel 17:25).

As usually always happens, the rich became richer, the poor poorer. Excavations reveal that the agrarian people had been required to donate enormous quantities
of goods to the royal stables and barns. And if an unfortunate farmers lost all his worldly possessions in the process, there was little chance that he would be able to recover, for the simple reason that the regulations governing the return of land during the Year of Jubilee were apparently never enforced. (They may have been enforced regionally for a time, but there is no evidence that it ever became general policy).

This is the misery which existed at the time of the psalms. The "suffering" one may have been just such a bankrupt farmer who had been forced to sell his wife and children into slavery. Imagine the despair of the man when his wealthy employer thereupon refuses to pay him for an honest day's work! Because the robber baron cared not a whit about the laws of Yahweh (Deuteronomy 24:12-15; cf. Job 24:7). Imagine the agony of a formerly free and independent winegrower who is forced to eke out a meagre living nursing the vines which used to be his! (Job 24:6; cf. 10ff). Many of the poor undoubtedly lived in the shanties which have been uncovered in Samaria and ate the crumbs from the tables of the rich or were openly cheated in the market-place (Amos 8:5ff). Exploitation and humiliation was the fate of the impoverished masses in the days of the prophet Micah (Micah 3:2ff). Many were so destitute that they were forced to pawn their grain-mills which was as essential to an Israelite household as grain itself. Imagine the terror which these people felt! The fear to sink from freedom into serfdom; from serfdom into slavery; the terrible prospect of having to sell one's children into slavery; the terror of the tax-collector; the devastation of the young maiden who was forced to submit to the advances of a man as well as of his son (Amos 2:7). Can you imagine what it is to be scorned, even by your family, if you are poor? (Proverbs 14:20; 19:4,7). Or to have your wisdom spurned simply because you are destitute? (Ecclesiastes 9:15).
And what recourse did the poor have?

Arise, Jehovah; O God, lift up thy hand; forget not the afflicted.

Why does the wicked renounce God, and say in his heart, "Thou wilt not call to account"?

Thou dost see; thou dost note trouble and vexation, that thou mayest take it into thy hands; the hapless commits himself to thee; thou hast been the helper of the fatherless.

c) Labour.

A third cause of poverty among the righteous was labour, an institution known throughout the Near East. David already had a minister of labour in his government (II Samuel 20:24). Solomon embarked on an ambitious policy of construction which included the temple, the royal palace, the defensive ramparts of Jerusalem and the nation's fortresses (I Kings 9:15-19). In addition to slave labour, Solomon also employed Israelites (I Kings 9:20ff; 5:13). Adoniram was minister of labour under Solomon (I Kings 4:6; 5:14; cf. 11:28). After him, king Asa recruited the entire nation to reinforce the defensive fortresses of Geba and Mispah (I Kings 15:22). Still later, the prophet Jeremiah condemned king Jehoiakim for failing to pay his construction workers: "Loe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbour serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages" (Jeremiah 22:13).

Such phenomena must also be kept in mind while reading the psalms.

d) Constant warfare.

A fourth cause of poverty was warfare which almost constantly tore at the fabric of Hebrew communal life. There were wars with Syrians, Assyrians, Egyptians and Babylonians. There were repeated clashes with the Philistines. There were bloody civil wars. And it is quite probable that the righteous, because of their
vulnerability for reasons mentioned above, suffered most of all.

The agrarian population generally suffered more grievously than did the townspeople. The countryside was usually the battleground, and while the food supply to the cities would inevitably dry up, the townspeople would be quick to rush out and plunder their more hapless countrymen.

Wars were declared in springtime, "the time when kings go forth to battle" (II Samuel 11:1; I Chronicles 20:1). Nearly all Assyrian campaigns were launched between April and June. The reason for that should be obvious: roads are passable, transportation and supply lines easy to maintain, troop movement and strategy predictable. Armies from the far-flung empires of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Syria lived off the land; their arrival on the battleground therefore had to correspond with the harvest season. There is an Egyptian papyrus scroll extant which describes in great and lively detail how this technique was applied by Egyptian armies invading Canaan. Is this possibly what happened when Shishak, king of Egypt, attacked Jerusalem under Jehoash? (II Chronicles 12).

Let's investigate some of the excesses of ancient warfare. In those days, of course, soldiers were not paid in currency. How, then, would a soldier be reimbursed for his troubles? Usually he was given carte blanche by his commanding officer to collect anything of value from the local population. The price paid by the local population staggered the imagination. No holds were barred. Invaders carried off not only gold and silver, but also entire herds of cattle and sheep. They looted the bodies of the dead. Cities were plundered and razed to the ground. Whole populations were decimated or disappeared completely. Hostages were taken from the upper crust of society and innumerable young men, women and children were carried off into servitude in a strange land. General Haman's wife had a Jewish girl in domestic service in Babylonia, well before the general
What misery must have been experienced by the righteous through these wars of attrition! Wars formed the wrath of God visiting His people for their covenant apostasy. And isn't it curious that the few who remained true were also the ones who suffered most? But the psalms are testimonies of their undying loyalty to the God of their covenant.

e) Widows and orphans, sojourners, and levites.

The righteous, then, were mostly the poor in the land. And who were counted among the poor? Certainly the widows, orphans, sojourners, and levites were included in this category.

***

In the ancient world, the word "widow" was synonymous with misery. Israel, during its apostasy, was no exception. The Old Testament hardly ever speaks of a wealthy widow. On the contrary, the word "widow" is usually mentioned in the same breath with the poor, the miserable and the oppressed. Without the protection of a husband or a righteous government, such widows were left defenseless in the face of the godless.

If her husband had left her a piece of property, her greedy neighbours would surreptitiously move the markers until she had lost all of it. If her husband left her nothing but debts, which often happened, she would face the dismaying prospect of losing her children to the auction-block. "Your servant my husband is dead... the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves", grieved the widow in the time of Elisha (II Kings 4:1; cf. Job 6:27). In Job 24:9, we read: "There are those who snatch the fatherless child from the breast, and take in pledge the infant of the poor". Psalm 94:6 even records that "they slay the widow and..."
the sojourner, and murder the fatherless*. Most landowners were not like the righteous Boaz, and most widows not as fortunate as Ruth.

***

Sojourners and levites, also, were dependent on the justice or righteousness of their fellow man (Numbers-Deuteronomy). Levites, of course, had no share in the inheritance. They possessed no land and therefore no wealth. Yahweh was their treasure. They were allowed to keep part of any gifts and offerings made to Yahweh for themselves. It's safe to say that a levitical family would be the first to feel the impact of apostasy. What part did the levitical order have in composing the psalms? It is possible that Psalm 73 originated from the impoverished levitical ranks. If this is true, it shows how thoroughly embittered even the levites had become at the prosperity of the wicked: "But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled...For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalm 73:1,2). But the peace of God descended upon him and he quickly recovered: "But for me it is good to be near God" (73:28). This was a typically levitical reaction: others may indulge in the pleasures of this world, but "God...is my portion for ever" (73:26).

If the righteous were the first to suffer, then the levitical order were first among the first, followed closely by widows and sojourners. Levites had no assets to fall back on at all and were completely dependent on the benevolence of other people.

***

Hopefully, the illustrations have given content and meaning to words like "poor", "suffering", "oppressed", "neek" and "weak", in order that the reader will be able to place those songs in their proper historical context.

Of course, there were also wealthy Israelites who remained true to the covenant, but they were exceptions.
For the most part the righteous ones were poor, meek, needy, suffering and weak and may safely be identified with exploited labourers and impoverished farmers, widows and orphans, sojourners and defenseless, neglected levites.

4. Persecuted for righteousness sake.

"Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (II Timothy 3:12). The Old Testament righteous could certainly sympathize with that. They hungered and thirsted after righteousness. They honoured the covenantal right of God to lay claim to their lives and that of their fellowmen. Their highest priority was to be righteous before the living God. This explains why they continuously and persistently opposed those who had forsaken covenant ways. It also explains why they were so fanatically persecuted. Both Bible and church history witness to the frequent and often intense persecution of the saints.

***

Christ once referred to the persecutions as "all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel, to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar" (Matthew 23:35). And precisely why did Cain murder Abel? "Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous" and because "Cain was evil" (I John 3:12). There have been more such evil people among God's nation. Moses's own congregation, for example, was resolved to "stone them with stones" (Numbers 14:16). And why did they plan to be rid of Moses? Because he trusted in Yahweh and was righteous. David, another righteous man, believed in Yahweh and defeated Goliath in combat, but it earned him the sinister hatred of the godless king Saul. The righteous prophets Elijah, Elisha, Amos and Jeremiah were also persecuted because of their steadfast trust in Yahweh. During the reign of Ahab, Obadiah, his chancellor, hid about a hundred righteous prophets in a cave and fed them bread and water.
(I Kings 18:4). Otherwise Jezebel would have assassinated them all. She also wanted to destroy Elijah (I Kings 19:2).
The prophet Amos was scornfully dismissed from Bethel, the godless Jeroboam's sanctuary (Amos 7:10ff). You are also undoubtedly aware of Jeremiah's tribulation: he commemorated his fortieth year as Yahweh's chosen prophet in prison or at the bottom of a well....

In addition, there are many nameless righteous who suffered lamentably because of their righteousness. We are reminded of David's band of nameless outcasts in the cave of Adullam (I Samuel 22:1ff); the prophet's nameless widow, in great despair, appealed to Elisha (II Kings 4:1-7); the nameless widow of Naboth of whom no more is heard (I Kings 21); and the unidentified poor who were sold into slavery for a common pair of shoes (Amos 2:6). They were all persecuted because of their righteousness, hated because they would not let go of Yahweh's commandments.

But to be persecuted for righteousness' sake places the resulting suffering and grief in a very special light! Poverty, sickness, reverses and oppression may be essentially human conditions, and, indeed, heathens and unbelievers experience those also, but that's not what the psalms bring to light. The psalmists' suffering is unique, because all the agonies, pains and destitution associated with it are the result of their righteousness.

The suffering, therefore, is qualified by righteousness. Anyone may suffer adversity, loss, injury, bereavement, bankruptcy, scorn and despair for any number of reasons; the psalmists suffered them all for only one reason, namely, their own righteousness.

There is a line of demarcation running through God's Word separating the godless -- generally powerful and rich -- from the righteous -- usually poor and oppressed. The former care not a whit about God and His covenant Law; the latter devoutly stick to His Word and patiently await the fulfillment of His promises. That is the context of the psalmists' plaintive cries about poverty and scorn,
persecution and lies, perjurers and webs of intrigue....

Our Saviour would have called that "cross-bearing". Hearing a cross is suffering sorrow, serenely, for righteousness' sake. For God and His cause; for Christ's sake "as sheep to be slaughtered" (Psalm 25:3; 44:23; Romans 8:36). And whatever other sorrow we suffer, a suffering we share with the rest of the world, is the result of sin and the subsequent punishment.

***

From this we can readily understand why the sixteenth century Reformation, when it introduced congregational singing, reached for the psalms. For centuries, the mediaeval church had forbidden participation by the faithful. The Reformation, however, returned to the model of the early church, and encouraged communal singing. Only: what were they to sing? There were no Psalmbooks as we know them. Slowly, a few Psalmbooks came into circulation. And they were collections of the psalms for the simple reason that persecuted sixteenth century reformers could readily identify with the suffering of their spiritual forebears in the Old Testament! Given the same context of suffering, it seemed that time had stood still; the book of Psalms provided the faith-response so desperately needed in the sixteenth century. What better rallying-cry for the reformers than the psalms wherein God's promises shone like a beacon in the darkness of exile and persecution, before the terror of the flames? And the link was not made because of a superficial identification— or projection—need, but because the book of Psalms provided comfort and concrete instruction.

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides for ever.
As the mountains are round about Jerusalem,
so the Lord is round about his people,
from this time forth and for evermore.
For the centre of wickedness shall not rest
upon the land allotted to the righteous,
lest the righteous put forth their hands to do wrong.
Do good, 0 Lord, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts!
But those who turn aside upon their crooked ways
the Lord will lead away with evildoers! Peace be in Israel! (Psalm 125)
When we read about persecuted Christians, we tend to pity them. Yet our Saviour congratulated them because they were persecuted for His sake. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). Those words by our highest Prophet and Teacher posit the fundamental theme of the book of Psalms: it is the songbook of those who were persecuted for righteousness' sake.

5. Mourning for Zion.

How did these righteous people respond to their suffering? They did not possess superhuman qualities which enabled them to somehow transcend their suffering. Asaph, we learn from Psalm 73, was embittered and envious of the good fortune seemingly enjoyed by the wicked. But he did not long remain so: "I was stupid and ignorant, I was like a beast toward thee" (Psalm 73:22). This sums up his regret at his earlier envy. Elijah, defeated by constant adversity, sat down and wished that he would die (1 Kings 19), and Jeremiah was so depressed that he thought even God had deceived him (Jeremiah 20:7-18). There were undoubtedly more such depressed, defeatist righteous people who were on the verge of giving up all hope...

Periods of depression notwithstanding, this was not their typical response. Nor did they respond with activism, which prompted them to pursue their "inalienable rights". Their typical response was to lay their griefs before Yahweh and to ask Yahweh to right the wrongs committed against them. "Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me" (Psalm 35:1). "Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity" (Psalm 26:1). But the thing which disturbed and grieved the faithful most was the fact that God's laws and righteousness were so scornfully rejected.

They were, in the words of Isaiah 61:3, "those who mourn in Zion".

While they personally suffered the indiscriminate abuses of the godless, the greater harm, as far as they
were concerned, was the injury inflicted upon God's covenant and covenantal laws. The psalms knew them as "the brokenhearted" and "the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18). In this sense, many of the righteous had also been poor. Hannah, Samuel's mother, for example, in all probability had been very wealthy. Her husband had enough wherewithall to keep ten wives and offer a valuable three-year old bull at Samuel's dedication. Economically speaking, they were well off. Yet, her praisem, which paints a gloomy picture of the Israelite church in the time of the judges, she compared herself with the poor and needy: "He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap" (I Samuel 2:8). And, having counted herself among the Lord's poor, she knew that Yahweh had reserved for her to "sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour" (I Samuel 2:8). This was the mother of the prophet Samuel, the reformer in the age of judges and tutor to the boy-king David.

"Poor", therefore, does not always mean financial penury. The poor included those affluent righteous who were heartbroken by the lamentable state of affairs in Zion. Notice the inscription above Psalm 102: "A prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before Yahweh".

"Blessed are those who mourn especially for Zion", said Jesus, picking up the theme registered by Psalm 126: "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him" (Psalm 126:5ff).

Do you mourn for Zion? Have you heard the scornful challenge raised by the Goliath of apostate knowledge in the face of God and His Word? Is it possible that there are people among us who have recognized the enemy and actually mourn for the innumerable victims claimed by modern science over the past two centuries? Do you sorrow
upon realizing how little is being done to effect a return to God and his Word? If so, the psalms concerning the "mourners in Zion" should touch a responsive chord (Psalms 44, 71, 77, 79, 80, 89, 90, 102). Here the righteous intercede before God for the needs of the people of Israel. These psalms also teach how we should pray in times when God brings his judgment on Zion.

They also reveal that their authors realized the unity of their race and that, their personal righteousness notwithstanding, they shared responsibility for sins committed by their contemporaries and ancestors. And not how they approach Yahweh: fully aware that God's wrath over them is justified, they appeal to his promises, call on his name, beg his forgiveness and comfort themselves with their trust in God's eternal kingship. We'll return to those themes later; in the meantime, however, there follow a few psalm fragments to illustrate the point:

Psalm 74:1ff:

O God, why dost thou cast us off for ever? Why does thy anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture? Remember thy congregation, which thou hast gotten of old, which thou hast redeemed to be the tribe of thy heritage! Remember Mount Zion, where thou hast dwelt.

Psalm 77:3,7:

I think of God, and I moan; I meditate and my spirit faints. Will the Lord spurn for ever, and never again be favourable?

Psalm 79:1ff:

O God, the heathen have come into thy inheritance; they have defiled thy holy temple; Do not remember against us the iniquities of our forefathers; let thy compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low. Help us, O God of our salvation,
for the glory of thy name;
deliver us, and forgive our sins,
for thy name's sake!

Psalm 102: ff:

I lie awake....
and mingle tears with my drink,
because of thy indignation and anger;
for thou hast taken me up and thrown me away.
But thou, O Lord, art enthroned for ever;
thy name endures to all generations.
Thou wilt arise and have pity on Zion....

Our twentieth century has been afflicted by two
world wars, and the end is not in sight.... Western
christendom has been assaulted from all directions,
especially from within, by many apostate spirits.
Is this not sufficient reason to listen to the psalms?
To listen to what the righteous had to say about those
who mourn for Zion. And from our Saviour we can learn the
immense value and blessedness of such mourning: "Blessed
are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted".

6. The Songbook of the Remnant.

"In his days may righteousness flourish" (Psalm 72:7).
The Psalm dates either from the reign of Solomon or
from before it. Throughout Joshua's days, Israel served
Yahweh (Joshua 24:31), but we know that between Joshua and
David things did not go well. The reigns of David and
Solomon may well mark the fulfillment of the prayer of
Psalm 72. The times of Joshua, David and Solomon aside,
then, the history of Israel was generally one of faith-
lessness and oppression of the righteous. The prophetic
books leave little doubt about that. These books also
suggest that the righteous in Israel had been reduced
to a minority, a Remnant. We have discussed that earlier.

During the judges, apostasy grew and the righteous
dwindled in numbers. Among the righteous were Manoah and
his wife, Samson, Naomi, Ruth, Hannah and Elkanah.
Furthermore, there was Samuel and his students and fol-
lowers, such as the prophets Gad and Nathan, Abigail,
prince Jonathan and, of course, David and his loyal
followers.
The reigns of David and Solomon saw a return to Yahweh and his service. But only a century later, the disheartened Elijah complained: "... for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away" (I Kings 19:10). To which Yahweh replied: "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (I Kings 19:18). One hundred years after Solomon, the righteous were clearly in the minority, a very small remnant indeed!

Just over a century again, king Hezekiah requested Isaiah, when the Assyrians threatened Jerusalem: "...lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left" (II Kings 19:4). And yet another hundred years passed before Josiah, great-grandson of Hezekiah, sent to inquire of the prophetess Huldah concerning the book which Hilkiah had discovered in the house of God. Deeply impressed by the books of the law uncovered, Josiah asked the prophetess to consult Yahweh about "those who are left in Israel and in Judah..." (II Chronicles 34:20ff).

By the time of the Later Prophets, the word "remnant" had become standard usage. Isaiah's "Shear-jashub," for example, was called Shear-jashub, which means "a remnant shall return" (Isaiah 7:3; cf. 8:3, 18). Also, in his call to Isaiah, Yahweh had made it plain that he would be preaching to a remnant (Isaiah 6). But it was nevertheless a hard blow for Isaiah: "Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (Isaiah 53:1). The righteous in those days were the people who followed Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 8:16) or his contemporary, Amos, who spoke of "Joseph's remnant" (Amos 5:5). Another in those days was Micah, who prophesied about the remnant right about that time (Micah 2:12; 7:18).
It was only thanks to Yahweh's faithfulness and mercy that even a small minority of faithful remained during those evil years. "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel" (I Kings 19:18). "If Yahweh of hosts had not left us a few survivors..." (Isaiah 1:9; cf. Jeremiah 31:2; Amos 5:15; Ezra 9:13ff). "...for out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of Yahweh will do this" (II Kings 19:31; cf. Genesis 6:8).

The New Testament message is the same. The Lord Jesus also gathered to himself a remnant out of the Jewish church. This, too, represented the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and experience.

***

The remnant is the source of the book of Psalms! The book of Psalms may justly be called Songbook of the Remnant. The book contains the songs and thoughts of the saintly just who had been saved throughout all of Israel's history. The Psalms' inspiration is of God; the experiences are those of Elijah's seven thousand, Hezekiah's "remnant that is left", the remnant mentioned by Josiah, and "Joseph's remnant" from the days of Amos....

***

The existence of this remnant also explains why we find both comforting promises of salvation and sombre judgments pronounced upon the wicked in all the books of the Later Prophets (Isaiah—Malachi). Have you never wondered about this two-fold message? We must remember that the prophets were not only addressing the wicked, but also the righteous! Their directive was: "Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him, for what his hands have done shall be done to him" (Isaiah 3:10-11).
We shouldn't commit the mistake of idealizing the oppressed minority position of the righteous. Many a time they were driven to despair by the seeming hopelessness of their condition, as is proven by the following fragments:

Psalm 12:1:
Help, Yahweh; for there is no longer any that is godly; for the faithful have vanished from among the sons of men.

Psalm 14:2ff:
Yahweh looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any that act wisely, that seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one.

The author spoke of "evildoers" in Israel, people who "ate up" the righteous as they ate bread (14:4)! He also pleaded with Yahweh for deliverance for the righteous and reproached the wicked for committing their evil despite their "knowledge" of God. Why did they ignore Yahweh, knowing they did so at their peril? But he also comforted himself with the prospect of Yahweh's intervention on behalf of the righteous remnant, to which he belonged: "There they shall be in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous!" (Psalm 14:5).

This consolation came straight from the prophets who had addressed their promises to the righteous remnant. What else is this than a prophetic echo reverberating through the psalms? The prophets proclaimed the coming of the spiritual Israel and Christ's Lordship on earth in times when the exile and return were still events of the future. "All the nations shall flow to it (the post-exilic remnant). For out of Zion shall go forth the law (torah; a mission to be carried out by Paul and the apostles). And they shall..."
bear their swords into plowshares (at the return of Christ). . . " (Isaiah 2:1-5). "Then the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples like dew from the Lord, like a lion among the beasts of the forest ... a noisy multitude of men" (Micah 5:6ff; 2:12). This remnant may appear to be "a people humble and lowly" (Zephaniah 3:12), but nevertheless a people who live with the sure knowledge that "the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people" (Isaiah 28:5).

***

The echo of this and similar prophetic promises can be clearly heard in the songbook of the righteous remnant. And the global covenantal community was already anticipated by the sons of Korah, who composed Psalm 87: "Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia — 'This one was born there.'

Whereas apostate Israel constantly relied on its armies and numerous military alliances, the faithful few only relied on Yahweh:

Psalm 20:7:

Some boast of chariots, and some of horses; but we boast of the name of Yahweh our God.

Psalm 33:16ff, 20:

A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield.

And while most Israelites abandoned Yahweh and worshipped the Baals instead, the holy remnant prayed for its king and for the coming of the future David of the messianic promise (Psalms 72, 89). Under the circumstances, it might be supposed that this remnant isolated itself from the rest of Israel and looked down upon them with haughty condescension; but this was not so. On the contrary, they were keenly aware of the
solidarity of their race, and their co-responsibility for the sins of their ancestors and contemporaries:

Psalm 106:6ff:

Both we and our fathers have sinned;
we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly.
Our fathers, when they were in Egypt,
did not consider thy wonderful works;
they did not remember the abundance of thy steadfast love,
but rebelled against the Most High....

Similar confessions can be found in Daniel 9, cf. Psalm 106:6ff. And while the majority knelt in adoration before the images of the two calves, before Baal and before "all the hosts of heaven" (II Kings 17:16; 21:3; 21:5; 23:4ff; II Chronicles 33:3-5), the faithful remnant, defying the spirit of the age, confessed:

Psalm 8:3:

When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established....

Psalm 19:1:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

Their songbook clearly outlines the movements of God's hand in Israel's history, judging the goddess and liberating the righteous. And even as the goddesses, blind to their obligations under the covenant, did not "regard the works of Yahweh, or the work of his hands" (Psalm 28:5), the righteous devoutly confessed:

Psalm 78:3ff, 7:

Things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us,
We will not hide them from their children's children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of Yahweh, and his might,
and the wonder which he has wrought.
So that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments.

That's how the Psalm's saintly remnant confessed its faith. Their confession was consistent in all areas of life, and, it should be noted, diametrically opposed
to the predominant spirit of the age, as is also clearly seen in the case of king Ahaziah, who turned to Baal-Zebub, god of Ekron, for healing, while the faithful appealed to Yahweh (Psalm 30).

***

What was true then is also true today: our heavenly Father has set apart from a largely secular, apostate western "christendom" a remnant who fear him and observe his Word. On the surface, this remnant may appear to be very large and, indeed, we can never ascertain its true number. Possibly though, the number of truly righteous people in our total church population may be relatively small. But: "the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and his ears toward his cry (Psalm 34:15).

While they may presently suffer the abuses of the wicked, as has so often happened before, "the meek shall possess the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity" (Psalm 37:11,29).

We pray that the remnant living in the midst of modern christendom may yet grow in number. We also pray that they may increasingly experience solidarity with other remnants of bygone ages, including the righteous remnant whose lives were registered by the prophets and whose songs were recorded in the psalms. Finally, we implore God to direct the twentieth century remnant to embrace the book of Psalms as the praise- and prayer-book of spiritual Israel: she righteous Remnant in Isra-
The word "godless" appears eighty-one times in the book of Psalms. Including the various synonyms for the word "godless", the apostate part of Israel is mentioned hundreds of times!

Who were these godless? That question is just as important for a good understanding of the psalms. They were a category of people in opposition to the righteous. Failure to deal with them would leave the book of Psalms unintelligible.

What do the psalms say about the godless? Two things must be kept in mind. In the first place, as concerns the godless, the psalms echo the message of Torah and Prophets (cf. §2). In the second place, we now live under the terms of a New covenant, of which Christ has become Surety (Hebrews 7:22; 8:6,13); this means that if we are going to follow the example of the psalms and sing about the godless, we must do so as disciples of Christ. But we cannot ignore what the psalms tell us about the godless, the enemies, the scoffers and hypocrites.

1. Where are the godless to be found?

What does the word "godless" mean to you? Do you include heathens and those who deny God? Many biblereaders probably suppose the godless to be blasphemers, criminals or anyone with habitually repugnant behaviour.

As far as deniers of God as godless, theoretical atheists was concerned, they were simply not known in the days of Israel, not even among the heathen nations. There were "fools", who said in their heart "There is no God" (Psalm 14:1; 53:2), but even such fools would not have claimed that no God existed. In those days, no one doubted the existence of gods. If anything, people such as the fool may be said to have had a "practical" atheism, but not a "theoretical" atheism. Theoretical atheism was reserved for our contemporary "christian" era. When modern man maintains...
that there is no God, it means that he has convinced
himself that God does not exist. But when the "fool"
in Israel claimed that there was no God, he meant
that God does not concern Himself with the affairs of
men and does not hold man responsible for his actions
(Psalm 10:4). The fool thought: "Yahweh does not see;
the God of Jacob does not perceive" (Psalm 94:7).
To which Yahweh replied: "But they do not consider that
I remember all their works" (Hosea 7:2). To the fool
God certainly existed, only He did not concern himself
with man's behaviour.

*Wicked* men were decidedly not deniers of God.

***

Could they have been heathens? Some of the psalms
mention foreign enemies; one such psalm is 33: "Yahweh
brings the counsels of nations [heathens] to nought; he
frustrates the plans of the peoples" (Psalm 33:10).
But there are actually no more than ten psalms in which
the enemy identified is a heathen nation.

I wouldn't contend that Scripture nowhere calls
the heathens "*gadarenes*". Abraham called the inhabitants
of Sodom "*gadarenes*" (Genesis 18). Still, it is safe to
say that the identification of the heathens with the
*Wicked* is exceptional. Usually, the term is reserved
for Israelites, members of the Sinai covenant, Yahweh's
sworn servants. "For wicked men are found among my
people", Yahweh complained to Jeremiah, and similar
accusations are found throughout the books of the Torah,
Prophets and Writings. The *Wicked* were a special breed
of Israelites.

***

Where, then, were the *Wicked* to be found?
We should not immediately look for them among the
heathen nations. In first instance, they were members
of God's chosen people, members of the Old Testament
church. There is sufficient evidence in the Bible
to believe that the overwhelming majority of *Wicked*
mentioned lived under the favoured conditions created
by Yahweh through His covenant at Sinai.
2. A nation bearing no fruit.

Whoever sees the godless exclusively, and even in first instance, as blasphemers, criminals and seedy extortionists seeking to exploit and rob the righteous may be mistaken....

The godless often had the appearance of great piety! It may be that the "faithful ones" mentioned in Psalm 50 were such apparently pious people who, in fact, were no better than the wicked mentioned in verse 16, to whom Yahweh said: "What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips?" Proverbs 21:27 knew such as brought their sacrifices to Yahweh with phoney piety. Yahweh deeply resented their offerings, but they were in His temple nevertheless. King Saul had also been among the "sanctimonious" godless. Said Samuel to Saul: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (I Samuel 15:22).

No one could improve on Saul's offerings, but his obedience left much to be desired! He was apparently someone who cared a great deal about the letter of the law (I Samuel 13:9, 14:32ff). And still he dared to swear an oath by Yahweh, even as he consulted the medium at Endor, after Yahweh had refused to answer him! (I Samuel 28:10; cf. Jeremiah 12:2).

***

Appearances could be very deceiving indeed. The godless could mask their evil very convincingly with shows of piety. Note Psalm 28: "Take me not off with the wicked, with those who are workers of evil, who speak peace with their neighbours, while mischief is in their hearts" (verse 3). Psalm 10 leaves the impression of a godless man who ingratiated himself with his neighbours in order to ensnare them or manipulate them. There were even those who pronounced benedictions on their intended prey: "The blessing of Yahweh be upon you" (Psalm 129:8). Says Psalm 62:4: "They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse". The godless could be very smooth, very convincing. They spoke softly, with covenantal language carefully chosen, but
their intent was evil. Several psalms refer outrightly to their "flattering tongue" and "flattering lips" (Psalm 5:10;12:3). In Psalm 55, David complained of someone whose "speech was smoother than butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords".

Were the godless outlaws and convicted criminals? Certainly the passages mentioned above do not refer to "the criminal element". On the contrary, they were by and large respectable, bourgeoise types who generally commanded the respect and admiration of most of the citizenry.

***

This description of the godless is reinforced by the Torah and the Prophets. They were, as Paul called them "holding the form of piety but denying the power of it" (II Timothy 3:5).

Let's look at a few examples. Korah, Dathan and Abiram appeared to be pious men. But note what they said to Moses: "You have gone too far! For all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and Yahweh is among them; why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of Yahweh?" (Numbers 16:3). Twice they intoned the name of Yahweh! And do you see who these men were? They were members of the Old Testament church! But Moses unmasked their evil intent and dismissed them as godless men (Numbers 16:26).

The story of Hophni and Phinehas should be familiar to us also. They were no less than priests of the Most High! But: "...they were worthless men... who treated the offering of Yahweh with contempt... and lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting" (I Samuel 2:12ff;22). These women had presumably come to serve Yahweh, but were dishonoured by his priests.... And we can well imagine that these women consented simply because they had been told by these priests that this was included in the proper service of Yahweh! Didn't this also happen among the heathens, where religion and prostitution were virtually...
one and the same thing? Canaanized Israel had probably adopted many of her neighbours' habits. And are these the two villains Hannah prophesied about in I Samuel 2:9: "but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness", a prophecy which was fulfilled shortly thereafter? (I Samuel 4).

Rechab and Baanah, in the service of David, beheaded Ishbosheth, son of Saul, as he lay sleeping. Thereupon, they reported to David with the following pious words: "Here is the head of Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life; Yahweh has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring" (II Samuel 4:8). But, despite their outward piety, they were condemned by David as wicked men and executed for their treachery (II Samuel 4:5-12).

Commentary on the renegade Absalom is not necessary. He preceded the revolutionary coup against his own father with the following pious pretense: "Pray let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed to Yahweh, in Hebron" (II Samuel 15:7).

And what shall we say about king Ahab? Truly he was a wicked man. He masked his true intentions with a veil of respectable piety, which was of his own making. Outwardly, he revered Yahweh; in fact, he ostensibly tried to please Yahweh through the names of his sons, Ahaz-Yah, Jehoram, Athal-Yah. He surrounded himself with the prophets of Yahweh. But inwardly, he scorned the order of Sinai to do away with the Canaanite influences (cf. Genesis). This king led Israel from the surrogate service of Yahweh, a service in which the name of Yahweh only formally appeared, to the idolatrous service of Jezebel's Baals. He also approved the murder of Naboth, a brother in the Israelite church! (I Kings 21).

He even had the gall to accuse the faithful prophet Elijah of bringing misfortune upon Israel...! (I Kings 18:17). And when Jehoshaphat, Judah's king, allied himself through marriage with the apostate Ahab, the prophet Jehu reproached him: "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate Yahweh?" (II Chronicles 19:2).
The preceding were ten examples, all Israelites, all from God's people, of godless men: Korah, Dathan, Abiram, Hophni, Phinehas, Saul, Baana, Rechab, Absalom and Ahab. Among them, there was never any shortage of pious phrases or a show of religion. But in practical life, they cared little for Yahweh and his ordinances; they lived out of the idea that there was no God who cared... (Psalm 14:1; 53:2).

***

The message of the New Testament is much the same. We referred earlier to Paul's words in II Timothy, "they hold the form of religion but deny the power of it". In the same epistle Paul warned against Hymenaeus and Philetus "who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already [that is, in the heart]. They are upsetting the faith of some" (II Timothy 2:16ff). In that context, Paul spoke of wickedness. These are two examples among many of religious wickedness....

Finally, from Jude, another lesson as to how we can recognize ungodly people, piously practising a form of religion: "For admission has been secretly gained by some who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly persons who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ... These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own passions, loud-mouthed boasters, flattering people to gain advantage" (Jude 4,16).

***

The widespread belief that the ungodly were criminal types has prevented a proper understanding of Scripture and the Psalms. This is also true of the idea that the ungodly are predominantly "men of the world". The ungodly of the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings and the New Testament are primarily people who are members of the community, fifth-columnists in the church. Scripture presents them as hypocrites whose speech is that of the covenant but whose deeds are of the devil.

I've already pointed out that we are reluctant to openly consider ourselves righteous. And while we are quick to apply the word "ungodly" to those of the "world", we show the same reluctance when it comes to the fifth-columnists in our communal life, the church of Jesus Christ. Who, for example, even in our circles, would commit himself to calling the hypocrites of the suppressive Inquisition "ungodly"? They even wore religious habit and enjoyed the blessing of the church....

Or who would dare condemn some wealthy farmer, a prominent elder in the church no less, who bled his farm-labourers dry while he fervently prayed for his own salvation?

Perhaps we are a bit apprehensive about the word "ungodly". It's not really surprising, I suppose, that many christians identify the "ungodly" with the modern "godless" atheist. And if the two are equated, it's really no wonder that these christians hesitate to apply the word "ungodly" to those who attend the same worship services, confess the same creeds, sing the same psalms and belong to the same covenantal community.... seemingly, at any rate.

It should be clear by now that the ungodly are ungodly Israelites or ungodly christians, both of whom are formally members of a covenant and all of whom keep up the pretense of true religion but in the meantime reject God. It may be useful in this context to consider the Hebrew word for "wicked", which is rashaim. It will help to avoid misunderstandings. We should then be able to focus on how the psalmists, driven by the Holy Spirit, detailed conditions existing in the Israelite church. Guided by them, we should also be able to gain insight into situations existing in our own church circles.

***
The word rashaim had its origin in legal vocabulary and literally meant "the guilty". A righteous person was one who was right before God because he walked in God's covenantal ways; the wicked, rashaim, on the contrary, did not walk in those ways and were therefore guilty before God. "There is no fear of God before his eyes", Psalm 36:2 wrote of the wicked person (rashah).

Perhaps if the reader substitutes "guilty" for "wicked", many psalms would become more meaningful. You can then more easily apply that word to some of the "guilty" we've discussed in this chapter: Absalom, the inquisitor, and the greedy farmer, all guilty before Yahweh. They were church members, keeping up the front of their sanctimony with pious words. In general terms, they were guilty of committing perjury to their covenantal oath; specifically, they were guilty of perpetrating crimes and abuses upon their fellow-man.

***

When we discussed the righteous in the previous chapters, we listed synonyms which the psalmists had used to typify the righteous and illumine their life under covenantal terms. We should like to do the same with the wicked. Following is a list of synonyms for the wicked who had chosen to live outside the covenant:

- the sinners
- the offenders
- those committing unrighteousness
- the evil ones
- the wretched
- the evil doers
- the apostate
- the bad ones
- the enemies of Yahweh
- the enemies
- the antagonists
- the haters
- the raging
- the fools
- the crazed
- the proud
- the haughty
- the reckless
- the bragging tongue
- the scoffers
- the vicious
the hypocrites  
the lying lips  
the liars  
the deceivers  
the boasting tongue  
the men of blood  
the man of deceit and unrighteousness  
the violent

This, of course, is how the wicked were known to the righteous. The righteous saw through the hypocrisy of these "brothers" in the church. They were evil people, whatever their pretenses. They were wretched and apostate children of God.

Even our Saviour worked among them. "O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you?" (Matthew 17:17). And how many times did Paul not complain about the "antagonists"? And were these antagonists heathens and Romans, do you suppose? On the contrary, they were fellow christians! In Philippians 3:18, he complained about these fellow church members as being "enemies of the cross of Christ"! (cf. Luke 1:74).

In the previous chapter we singled out some names by which the righteous were known in the psalms. We'll do the same with the wicked.

4. The fool.

Our use of the word "fool" is different from Scripture. To us, a fool is a person whose actions are irrational, "foolish". Someone who goes out into the freezing cold without a coat, for example, is a fool. The word has no religious significance. But in Scripture, the word does have religious meaning. The Hebrew word for fool, nabal, indicates first of all how a man reacts to his God. As such, the word is a perfect synonym for "wicked", because it indicates behaviour which ignores God completely. The fool says in his heart "There is no God", or "That doesn't interest God, so I needn't worry", or "These are things God doesn't concern himself with"
(cf. Psalm 10:11; 14:1; 53:2).

***

Several of such fools are named by name in Scripture. One is Nabal, husband of Abigail. Nabal was one of those fools who said in his heart "there is no God", and he demonstrated it practically. Nabal understood nothing of the struggles of the Israelite church to return to Torah, struggles which had begun under Samuel and were continued through David's reign. This ignorance is typical of the fool because he simply does not "regard the work of Yahweh, or the work of his hand" (Psalm 28:5). Nabal's attitude was entirely consistent with the description Isaiah left of the fool: "For the fool speaks folly, and his mind plots iniquity: to practice ungodliness, to utter error concerning Yahweh, to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink" (Isaiah 32:6). True to form, Nabal denied David and his men food and drink, even though David had provided protection for his shepherds (I Samuel 25). Another such "wanton" fool was prince Amnon, one of the sons of David, who raped his own sister, Tamar (II Samuel 13:13).

There were even foolish prophets! Yet another example of how deceptive the religiosity of some people can be! There were many prophets who, despite the fact that God's judgment over Israel was clearly imminent, and despite the fact that Jeremiah had continuously warned the erring nation, blithely continued to proclaim that there would be peace and prosperity in the land. More pious wicked who "did not regard the work of Yahweh, or the work of his hand". They failed to understand God's wrath, and were therefore fools. And what does Scripture say of the people who uncritically followed such fools? They are "a foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but hear not" (Jeremiah 5:21). "For the shepherds are stupid, and do not inquire of Yahweh; therefore
they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered" (Jeremiah 10:21; cf. Ezechiel 13:3; Psalm 74:18).

***

The psalmists knew times when the wicked were in such an overwhelming majority, that they wondered whether there were any righteous left in Israel (Psalms 14, 53). Their appeals to Yahweh were heart-rending: "Help, Yahweh; for there is no longer any that is godly; for the faithful have vanished from among the sons of men" (Psalm 12:1). Those words place in a strikingly different light the words of our Saviour to the seemingly religious Scribes and Pharisees: "You blind fools!...you hypocrites... for you devour widows' houses and for a pretense you make long prayers...." (Matthew 23:17, 14).

Were the pharisaistic "fools" in effect not the same as their models of Psalm 14, "who eat up my people, as they eat bread"? (Psalm 14:4). This points out the sharp division which exists within the circle of God's people!

***

Briefly then, "fools" were Israelites who thought so little of Yahweh that they sent away the needy among God's people (I Samuel 25), and who took no note of Yahweh's momentous deeds in church and world, people such as the complacent, false prophets and shepherds in Jeremiah's day.

5. The scoffers.

In Psalm 1, we read about the "seat of scoffers". The reader may inadvertently think of theatre seats or bar stools, frequented only by pleasure seekers and degenerates! You may think: those are the scoffers we meet in the psalms....

And, of course, Scripture addresses itself to those people also. There were, for example, some boys who jeered at Elijah as he went to Bethel: "Go up, you baldhead!" (II Kings 2:23). Isaiah was ridiculed
by drunken priests who demanded of him: who does he think he is? Oh yes, they scoffed, he's the know-it-all who has come to impress us with his scraps of divine wisdom! "Whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message?" We certainly aren't about to listen to him, but perhaps ..."those who are weaned from the milk, those taken from the breast?!") Do you know what you'll get from him? they sneered, "...precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little". Who needs it?

When left in the original -- as one translation has endeavoured to do -- the sarcastic mimicry of these priests is even more biting. Try reading the following line aloud: "saw lasaw, saw lasaw, kaw lakaw, kaw lakaw, zeir sham, zeir sham".... Undaunted, Isaiah shot back at them: Laugh all you want, but remember this, "... by men of strange lips and with an alien tongue (Assyrian invaders) Yahweh will speak to this people". And the words which you scorn, namely "the precepts here and the lines there, the little here and the little there" will become the nails in your own coffins, and "you will go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken" (Isaiah 28).

This was the scorn and blasphemy to which God's Word and His prophets were subjected. But in these two cases, the scoffing was at least done openly.

***

We should not concentrate too much on this indiscriminate, public scoffing. There were cases of scoffing which were not as easy to identify. Scoffing could take a much more subtle form. There were many scoffers who cloaked their decadence with a very pious exterior. It's probably safe to say that there are more scoffers among the churched than the unchurched.

What makes a scoffer, at least the kind of scoffer who is difficult to spot? Proverbs gives
us a thumbnail sketch of such a scoffer: "'Scoffer' is the name of the proud, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride" (Proverbs 21:24).

The characteristics of the scoffer, therefore, are arrogance, haughtiness and pride. A scoffer is one who suffers from an inflated ego, from delusions of grandeur, not as a mental illness but as a presumptuous overestimation of his own worth before God. He does not know his place before the Almighty. And it is precisely the scoffer's scorn, his haughtiness, which the Almighty scorns: "Toward the scornful he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favour" (Proverbs 3:34).

The proud are the exact opposite of the humble. The proud assume a haughty position vis-à-vis God, while the poor remain humble before God.

The letter of James puts it this way: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6; I Peter 5:5). The reference is from Proverbs 3:34 mentioned above. Apparently James, too, felt that the proud and scorers are one and the same.

Two more quotes from Proverbs about the scoffer should suffice: "A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke" (Proverbs 13:1) and "A scoffer does not like to be reproved; he will not go to the wise" (Proverbs 15:12). Undoubtedly, these passages refer to attempts of correction by the Lord; indeed, that's what the entire book of Proverbs is about: to instruct the reader in the fear of Yahweh. But the scoffer rejects this instruction. He is a wicked Israelite whose pride goes against the grain of the instruction given by God's Word.

***

The picture of the scoffer as painted by the Psalms is the same. The scoffer of the Psalms was not the profane, sacriligious renegade we sometimes believe him to have been.
Read what Peter said about the scoffers:
"... scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation' (II Peter 3:3ff). This could just as well apply to modern theologians whose scientific reasoning has led them to scorn expectations of Christ's return, or who have demythologized Scripture. The "seat of scoffers", rather than referring to bar stools or theatre seats, could just as well be, say, chairs of theology at our modern universities! This arrogant pride, or refusing to take into account Christ's coming judgment over the living and the dead, is, according to Proverbs 21:24, the main trait of the scoffer.

Jude also stated that scoffers are internal to the christian community: "'In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.' It is these who set up divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit" (verse 18ff). On the surface, they appeared to be members of good standing; in fact, they had "infiltrated" the church (verse 4). They remained as inconspicuous as possible, but all the while they were sowing doubt and disunity!

***

The word "scoffer", just like "proud", haughty" and "arrogant" refer to those of supreme arrogance and self-esteem, not as a temporary lapse or a passing sin, but as a constant attitude which says: "With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is our master?" (Psalm 12:4). We are warned not to be misled by such. The Saducees, for example, were very respectable members of the Sanhedrin, yet to Mary they were "the proud" who lived off the "imagination of their hearts" (Luke 1:51ff).
They were capable of bringing divisions in Christ's church. These are the people we should focus on when we hear the psalmists complain about scoffers and the proud.

Have mercy upon us, Yahweh, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. Too long our soul has been sated with the scorn of those who are at ease, the contempt of the proud (Psalm 123:3ff).

It is true, of course, that many a righteous person has suffered the scorn of an abusive world, of those who are not members of the Christian community. Just as Samson suffered abusive scorn by the heathen Philistines, other righteous have been ridiculed and scorned by those living outside the boundaries of the church. But the Psalms' reference to scoffers is in first instance to those living in the covenant community. Thus, the demarcation line between the righteous and the wicked, both in Israel and today, runs right through the community of Jesus Christ.

Which of the prophets, do you suppose, has not suffered from the "scorn of those who are at ease" and "the contempt of the proud"? All the prophets were confronted by this element, whose arrogance presumably elevated them above the prophetic Word of God. Jeremiah 28, for example, describes the contempt with which the false prophet, Hananiah, treated Yahweh's true emissary. But the supreme example of suffered scorn is Christ Himself, when He had to endure the caustic sarcasm of both the pagan Roman soldiers and of the men who allegedly were of His own covenant community, the Scribes and High Priests....(Matthew 27:27-44).

***


The psalms used a great variety of words to describe the wicked: proud, arrogant, scoffers, scorners, unrighteous, evil-doers, etc. Among them is also the word "sinner".
I hope to return to specific acts of unrighteousness and evil later. But first, I should like to make this one thing clear: incidental sins, even grievous ones, do not make a person "wicked" in the sense the Bible uses and defines wickedness. Scripture has numerous examples of righteous people who fall into sin. In fact, the reconciliation service instituted by Yahweh at Sinai indicates that Yahweh knew His people would submit to their sinful inclinations. The great antithesis between the righteous and the wicked is not summed up by whether a person sins, even repeatedly or grievously, but rather by his consciously chosen attitude towards God and His Word. Therefore, expressions such as evil-doer, apostate or even sinner are not intended for those who daily fall into sin, but for those whose conscious, deliberate choice it is to live in sin. This is why the wicked are frequently called "sinners".

a) Is it correct to say 'we are all sinners'? You often hear people resignedly, and often meaningly observe: 'as far as that's concerned, we're all sinners'. Is that true? Does Scripture call both the righteous and the wicked "sinners"? I cannot dispute the above observation, of course, as far as it goes. There is no arguing with the Preacher when he wrote: "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins" or James: "For we all make many mistakes" (Ecclesiastes 7:20; James 3:2). Yet it's questionable whether this leads to the conclusion that 'we're all sinners anyway!' It doesn't reflect an accurate analysis of what the Word has to say about "sinners". It ultimately leads to the conclusion that mankind can be divided into believing sinners and unbelieving sinners, but all sinners nonetheless.
Scripture defines the word much more clearly. Scripture puts the dividing line between those who serve God as matter of deliberate commitment and those who consciously reject His Word. It's the latter category which is often known as "sinners" in Scripture. Next to the scoffer, the proud, the fool and the evil-doer, the sinner is another of the wicked who must be sharply distinguished from the righteous. Scripture presents the righteous and sinners as polar opposites. The following passages will undoubtedly make that clear.

***

Psalm 1 praises the righteous man because he does not walk in the way of sinners (Psalm 1:1). Sinners also have no rightful place in the congregation of the righteous (Psalm 1:5). The parallel which Psalm 1 draws between the wicked, scoffers and sinners is very clear. And this group forms the contrast to those righteous people who adhere to the Torah. To David, this division was also very real: "Sweep me not away with sinners, nor my life with bloodthirsty men...as for me, I walk in my integrity /Innocence/" (Psalm 26:9,11). That's the way it was: the righteous were innocent while the wicked were guilty.... The poet of Psalm 104 comforted himself with the prospect that"...sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more" (Psalm 104:35). There are more such passages in which sinners and wicked are mentioned in one breath: "If the righteous is requited on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner!" (Proverbs 11:31).

We read virtually the same thing in Peter: "If the righteous man is scarcely saved, where will the impious and sinner appear?" (I Peter 4:18; cf. I Timothy 1:9). The gospel writers often applied this same parallelism to tax-collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:10ff; 11:19; Luke 7:34, 15:1).
The reader will undoubtedly detect the fundamental difference between the righteous on one hand and the wicked, that is to say, the sinners, on the other. In contrast to the facile platitudine "oh, we're all sinners after all', Scripture is much more definite about the real identity of sinners.

b) Once a sinner, always a sinner?

The demarcation line drawn by Scripture between the righteous on the one hand and the wicked on the other does not lock individual people into one camp or the other. It is not an irrevocable, unchangeable judgment on the wicked. The call to repentance is heard throughout Scripture: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to Yahweh, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7). This message of hope is also sounded in Ezekiel: "But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him... Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezechiel 18:21ff; cf. 33:12-16). And again, from the New Testament this time: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (I Timothy 1:15). And when the tax-collector in the parable prayed: "God, be merciful to me a sinner", he did not remain a sinner but received forgiveness: "...this man went down to his house justified rather than the other /the Pharisee, who felt he needed no mercy/" (Luke 18:14; cf. Romans 5:1).

The point is clear: repentant and forgiven sinners are no longer "sinners".
Having been turned around by God's Word, they would henceforth strive to "enter by the narrow gate", resolved to walk in obedience before God. Having forsaken their former wickedness, they would henceforth observe God's covenantal terms. That they would stumble into sin was certain (James 3:2), because no one's righteousness frees him from sinning (Ecclesiastes 7:20), yet their sins could not reduce them to the state of "sinner" as long as they turned to God in prayer for forgiveness: "Our Father,... forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...."

***

The saying "we are all sinners" can of course be a Christian's honest assessment of himself. While he knows himself to be righteous before God through Jesus Christ, he is nonetheless aware of his sins, and repeatedly asks God's forgiveness. But there are also those who, when asked to choose between the Pharisee and the tax-collector ("God be merciful to me a sinner") would naturally opt for the tax-collector and would willingly emulate him. But there is still a not-so-subtle difference between the tax-collector and those whom Scripture calls "righteous". There is, for instance, a difference between Elizabeth, the mother of John, who is called righteous by Scripture and the woman we meet in Luke 7:36-50, who was called a sinner, but who eventually crossed the demarcation line. Caution must be observed in establishing who is a sinner and who is righteous. It may be more meaningful to say that, while there are two groups which are known as sinners and righteous, there are also "transition figures", that is, people, such as the tax-collector and the woman from Luke 7, who cross the demarcation line, so to speak. But we cannot lump all the righteous together with the wicked, simply
because we admire the tax-collector and the woman who knew themselves to be sinners but became righteous. The demarcation line, therefore, must be maintained, otherwise the Psalms become incomprehensible. The "sinners" of the Psalms are not the occasional sinner, nor the "transition figures", the sinners-become-righteous, so to speak. The "sinners" of the Psalms are the category of people whose conscious intent it is to flaunt God's Word. If we, through misguided humility, consider ourselves "sinners", we run the risk of identifying ourselves with the "sinners" in the Psalms. And what would be the point of the rich promises in the psalms? And who would be the righteous of Psalm 33: "Rejoice in Yahweh, O you righteous! Praise befits the upright"? (Psalm 33:1).

To avoid misunderstanding, I repeat once more that the righteous are not without sin. Moreover, Scripture teaches us that a man cannot be righteous out of himself. Scripture teaches us that we become righteous only because Christ has earned righteousness and holiness for us, and because the Holy Spirit, on the basis of God's covenant of grace, opens our hearts to God's Word and inclines us to walk in obedience and godly fear.

The demarcation line is not static (cf. Ezekiel 18 and 33), but it is a demarcation line nevertheless. That is why Scripture never applies the word "sinner", the Old Testament righteous who repented of their sins before the altar of Yahweh, nor to those of the New Covenant who "steadfastly seek their refuge in the blood, the death, the suffering and the obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in Him" (Belgic Confession, 29).
Recapitulating, "sinners" are the wicked, not the righteous. Because of their failure to show repentance and obtain forgiveness, they are guilty before God and their fellow man on the basis of God's holy righteousness. They may be Old Testament Israelites or New Testament Christians; in either case they are people who do not merely fall into sin because of weakness, but who actually revel in sin. They have chosen their own way where the righteous simply do not venture (Psalm 1:1). Their end is perdition, to be "consumed from the earth" (Psalm 104:35). "Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more...But the meek shall possess the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity" (Psalm 37:10ff; cf. Matthew 5:5).

7. The arrogant.

The most essential characteristic of the wicked is their arrogance, according to Scripture. It covers the attitude and behaviour of the proud, the scoffer, the self-sufficient and the bragging tongue. Each of these descriptions typifies man who pretends to be autonomous, who prefers not to bow the knee before God, but who feels enough self-reliance to be able to map out his own destiny. He is the antitype of the humble and often poor righteous man.

I should like to explore this arrogance a little further. When Asaph observed the apparent good fortune of the wicked, he remarked: "I was envious of the arrogant" (Psalm 73:3). Seeing as how "wicked" and "arrogant" are paralleled in this psalm, the question arises: how is it possible that so many Christians associate the word "wicked" exclusively with scoundrels and criminals?

***

I mentioned before that the word "sinner" is generally reserved for the wicked among God's people. Scripture nowhere lumps believers and unbelievers together under the general heading of "sinner",
but distinguishes very sharply between those who fall into sin --the righteous-- and those who persist in living in sin --the wicked. But there is a second misunderstanding whereby the wicked are often equated with criminals. The reason for this is that people are not always clear in their own minds about which evil(s) make sinners! What about moral iniquities?

Many christians will insist that evil is an ethical concern. They see "sin" as basically a moral or ethical transgression. They believe that a sinner is a person who commits all sorts of social injustices, such as murder, theft, sexual perversions and a variety of other indecencies.

The righteous, too, may be misled by the "religious fervour" which usually accompanies such a narrow view of what is sinful. They are in danger of missing the point of Scripture. But listen to the prayers of the psalmists when they needed insights into the world around them: "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" (Psalm 119:18) and: "Teach me good judgment and knowledge" (Psalm 119:66). And when the Lord answers such prayers and opens our eyes, we shall be able to understand properly what goes on around us in western christendom. Then, we can put sin in the proper perspective and try to sum it up this way: what frightened the faithful remnant during Israel's apostasy, and what should frighten us today, is not individual acts of sinning, however grievous those sins may have been, behaviourally, morally, socially or legally, but rather the supreme sin, which is the rejection of the Covenant of God. Sad to say, for many the covenantal relationship with God is ignored or even actively suppressed. Unfortunately, for many the covenantal relationship has been replaced by an emphasis on a personal relationship, to the extent that the covenantal impact is no longer heard in their "spiritual
songs" and "evangelical hymns". How many modern revivalist hymns actually make mention of the covenant? And how many of today's christians, enraptured by the individualistic bent of such hymns, give any thought at all to the covenant? What has happened to the vision that, long ago at Sinai, a merciful God hammered out a compact with His chosen people, through which He offered them salvation and without which there would only be perdition?

***

Within the context of God's covenant, there are both righteous and wicked. Not all wicked people are decadent and corrupt, overtly sinful and criminal. There are many "respectable" wicked, such as the arrogant, who frequently fill leading positions in the church. But I should like to be very clear about one thing: Such people cannot be saved through their self-righteousness; as far as salvation is concerned, the self-righteous are the same as the unrighteous. Nevertheless, it should be plain that Scripture distinguishes very clearly between the unrighteous and the self-righteous.

If sin were to be limited to transgressions of an ethical nature, we would not have to concern ourselves with, for example, the Pharisees and Scribes, or any arrogant self-righteous people. They do not commit moral sins; in fact, it's not to their advantage to do so, because it would openly discredit them in the eyes of others. If sin were a violation of moral laws, especially those affecting society, we would naturally focus on criminals and degenerates. But then we had better not bother with the Psalms, or with any portion of Scripture for that matter, because it would make no sense. But when we view sin as oath-breaking, as denial of the covenant, which is the foundation of our existence, then we can understand what
Scripture has to say about the wicked.

The severest of all sins is covenantal oath-breaking. In the Middle Ages, if a vassal broke his oath of loyalty to his lord, he was said to have committed "felony", a crime punishable by instant death. To commit such a "felony" before God places one in a position of guilt for which there is the extreme penalty. And to ignore God is equivalent to breaking the oath of loyalty which had been solemnly sworn. And there are many "christians" who, while leading an outwardly staid and respectable existence, have in fact all but ignored God and His covenantal requirements. Among them are the arrogant, of whom Psalm 119 has the following:

Godless men utterly deride me,  
but I do not turn away from thy law.  
The godless besmear me with lies,  
but with my whole heart I keep thy precepts;  
Let the godless be put to shame,  
because they have subverted me with guile;  
as for me, I will meditate on thy precepts.

Were these "godless men" Assyrians, Moabites, Egyptians or Philistines? Indeed they were not; they were Israelites, born into the covenant and raised under its promises, but Israelites who had broken their covenant-oath and had rejected or ignored their covenant-God! Today, we can find them among the faculties of universities, confessing the doctrine of autonomous science. They will tell us which parts of Scripture are "scientifically acceptable" and which parts are myths, unworthy of an Enlightened Age! Their influence is astonishing, their thought pervasive. But their arrogance and scorn is devastating to the truly righteous. Still, they are not unique; the Psalms provide us with the insight to recognize them and the tools with which to oppose them.
8. The violent and bloodthirsty.

"Save me from bloodthirsty men", cried David (Psalm 59:3). In Psalm 52, he asked: "Why do you boast, O mighty man?" Undoubtedly, many faithful throughout the ages have felt the heel of the oppressor making life unbearable for them. And, indeed, very often the wicked were violent, bloodthirsty men such as David had to cope with.

The Psalms are not very specific about definitions for bloodthirsty and violent men. For example: "...the wicked bend the bow, they have fitted the arrow to the string, to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart" (Psalm 11:2) and "The wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes his teeth at him...The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows, to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those who walk uprightly" (Psalm 37:12,14). Other psalms allude to "nets drawn" and "falling prey", images of war and the hunt. I have previously discussed this somewhat allegorical language (cf.$3,3 about the poor and suffering). Behind this unspecific language, however, were the many abusive communal injustices which were inflicted on the righteous poor by their wealthy, but wicked, countrymen.

References to "bloodthirstiness" and "butchery" should not always be taken literally, even though this was certainly the case with Ahab and Naboth (I Kings 21). The terms can also refer to figures such as Nabal who would coldbloodedly allowed David and his followers to starve. They were the avaricious landowners who refused to give their workers their just reward. They were grain dealers who sold chaff for grain. They were merchants who rigged their weights. They were creditors who repossessed essential tools. They were the rich who exploited their slave girls. They were unscrupulous farmers who claim-jumped their neighbour's property. They were men like king Jehoiakim,
who contracted workers to build his palace but failed to pay them. There were even those who "snatched the fatherless child from the breast and took in pledge the infant of the poor" (Job 24:9), much as the slave traders and slave owners did in America barely a century ago.... *Uncle Tom's Cabin* describes in great detail the cruel and inhuman treatment with which the pious whites often kept their chattels under control. Cruel and inhuman treatment, such as forcing the hungry to carry sheaves of grain, or the thirsty to tread the winepress (Job 24:10ff). But we need not throw stones at the white slave owner in America; not so long ago, our own urban and agrarian poor suffered the worst kinds of deprivation in the midst of plenty --and it still happens in other parts of the world.... Little wonder, then, that the righteous poor called such wicked "bloodthirsty", "deceivers" and "violent".

Still, we shouldn't think only of wealthy, greedy landowners, merciless tax-collectors, and crooked judges or merchants. Oppression of the poor was not simply a social-economic phenomenon. History teaches us that the righteous have always suffered, not necessarily because they were poor, but because they were righteous (cf. §3,4). The Lord called this suffering "cross-bearing".

Indeed, the motto of the righteous often seems to be "On the side of their oppressors there was power" (Ecclesiastes 4:1). Thus it was with David, opposed by Saul. Thus it also was with Elijah, pursued by Ahab. There were the hundreds of prophets, persecuted by Jezebel. There was also the prophet Uriah, hounded by Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 26:20ff). Jeremiah himself was constantly harassed by an impressive list of kings, queens, prophets and priests. Our Lord Jesus, too, was conspired against and persecuted by the notables of the church, who made common cause with the hated Romans in order to be rid of Him.
The apostle Paul did not escape persecution, though he admitted to having been a persecutor himself in earlier days (I Timothy 1:13). Acts tells us about Paul: "But Saul laid waste the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3). We meet bloodthirsty men from the days of Abel to those of Zechariah, who was murdered because of his righteousness --preaching the Word--, murdered by Scribes and Pharisees, murdered "between the sanctuary and the altar", no less (Matthew 23:35). How often do we think of Scribes as bloodthirsty men?

***

The psalmists did not name names....Their true suffering remains hidden under their literary images. For that reason, the wicked often appear stereotyped by the psalmists. They did this partly for literary reasons, but also to give a universal scope to their message. Their message has a timeless relevance and has been a source of comfort to the persecuted Waldenses of the Middle Ages and the oppressed christian slaves in nineteenth century America:

Rescue me, O God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man. (Psalm 71:4)
O God, insolent men have risen up against me; a band of ruthless men seek my life.... (Psalm 86:14).

Violence is also a characteristic of the wicked among God's people. "Violence covers them as a garment", complained Asaph (Psalm 73:6; cf. 5:7, 17:4, 18:49, 26:9, 54:3,5, 55:10, 59:3, 140:2,5,12). But the righteous left the matter of revenge to their God:

He will requite my enemies with evil; in they faithfulness put an end to them (Psalm 54:5)
O that thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God, and that men of blood would depart from me; (Psalm 139:19)

Undoubtedly, many righteous throughout the ages consoled themselves with the ultimate justice of God, the King who would come to enforce his...
God, and with Christ the King, who would come to enforce His Kingship and pass judgment over the wicked:

I have seen a wicked man overbearing, and towering like a cedar of Lebanon. Again I passed by, and, lo, he was no more; though I sought him, he could not be found. (Psalm 37:35ff).

Give the king thy justice, O God, and thy righteousness to the royal son! For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight. (Psalm 72:1,12,14).

That king is Christ, upon His coming!

9. Liars.

In conclusion, we'll look at yet another category of wicked, known in the psalms as liars, lying lips, deceivers and bragging tongues. What do these terms mean?

a) Truth and falsehood - certainty and doubt.

What was truth to the Israelite? The Hebrew word for truth -- emet -- is derived from the verb amin, meaning "to be secure","to be fastened down". This meaning is reflected in the word "amen", translated by "true and certain".

To the Israelite, "truth" indicated a condition of immovability, dependability, certainty. The words "thy word is truth" of John 17:17 mean "you can depend on it", "it will not change", "it won't let you down". The Word of God will not change, because it comes from a God who is forever faithful and dependable. God does not change; He is a rock upon whom man can safely build.7

Hebrew words for the lie show exactly the opposite: doubtful, changeable, undependable, shadowy, loose. Lies lack substance and the strength to stand the test of time. This is an eye-opener, because it means that when Scripture mentions "lie"
it does not necessarily mean the difference between what a person says and what he thinks, or between what he says and what actually happened. The word "lie", as used in Scripture, denotes the difference between what really is and what merely appears to be. It's the difference between something that has timeless validity and something that cannot stand the test of time; it's the difference between rock and sand, so to speak. The essence of the lie, if it can be said to have essence, is its shadowiness. To rely on the lie is to walk on thin ice or stumble onto quicksand: it appears to be firm, but it lack solidity. It may appear to be convincing, but in the long run it will not wash.

Lying lips.

We shall now have a look at deceivers and liars. These terms can cover a host of iniquities and injustices. They could be applied to false witnesses, perjurers, false accusers or anyone using misleading advertising or fraudulent marketing practises. Among them we find the elders of Jezreel, upon Jezebel's orders, called a fast (such piety!), but who accused Naboth falsely and thereupon stoned him! They were liars, deceivers, and, at the same time, bloodthirsty men. Deception and thirst for blood often went hand in hand with these people. Many psalms use vivid imagery to depict these people: "their throat is an open sepulchre" (Psalm 5:9) and "they make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the poison of vipers" (Psalm 140:3). This is strong language, but the psalmists knew the perils of an evil tongue, especially in their own midst, within the congregation of the Lord. Elsewhere, the imagery is of words soft as butter and smooth as oil, but which are nevertheless wielded like knives, swords and arrows to injure the righteous. Note also the sugary, flattering words addressed to our Lord: "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for
you do not regard the position of men" (!) (Matthew 22:16). An honest compliment? Keep in mind that these Pharisees were planning to "entangle him in his talk" (verse 15).

Doeg the Edomite, of Psalm 52, was another of these deceivers and plotters. He betrayed David's hiding-place to Saul. And, indeed, the information he passed on to Saul, "David has come to the house of Ahimelech" was factually true. According to accepted standards of "truth" the man was not a liar.... But what was his purpose with "telling the truth"? To commit mischief and plot destruction! And note what David said about this man:

Your tongue is like a sharp razor, you worker of treachery. 
You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth. 
You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue. (Psalm 52:2ff).

While being factually correct, Doeg was, in true fact, a liar. The question is, of course, what were the true facts in this context? A fascinating example of how misleading "facts" can be can be found in II Kings 6, the episode involving Ben-hadad's intended capture of Elisha. Throughout, Ben-hadad had been given "indisputable facts" by his advisors, only to discover that the true facts added up to an entirely different "picture". The true facts of redemptive history are often in direct contrast to what the "facts" may appear to be!

c) False prophets.

Those who want to take the trouble to study the Hebrew Bible's usage of words referring to lies, liars and similar terms, will be very surprised to discover how frequently these words are applied to false prophets, especially in the book of Jeremiah.

In Jeremiah's day, most Judaeans were firmly convinced that God would not allow the Babylonians to sweep them away. After all, had they not been
assured of this by their "prophets"? Had they not been told "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord"? (Jeremiah 7:4). And how should the Lord allow His temple to be desecrated? While these prophets proclaimed "Peace, peace! All is well!" Jeremiah was preaching the imminent punishment of Yahweh, the coming of Nebuchadnezzar as instrument of wrath in the hands of Yahweh.... "It is a lie which they are prophesying to you in my name..." shouted Yahweh through Jeremiah, but who listened? (Jeremiah 29:9; cf. Isaiah 30:9, Ezechiel 12:24, 13:8, 19,22, 22:28).

It's not that the false prophets did not appear to be deeply pious. Even as the storm clouds were gathering in the East, the false prophets were reassuring the crowds with deceptive words: "You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I [God] will give you assured peace in this place" (Jeremiah 14:13). And even as the first of the Judaeans were carried off into exile, they were still soothing their flock into serene somnambulance: "Behold, the vessels of the Lord's house will now shortly be brought back from Babylon" (Jeremiah 27:16; cf. 8:8, Ezechiel 13:6ff., Micha 2:11). By this time, the god-fearing Ezekiel and Daniel had already been transported into captivity. These prophets were allegedly the prophets of Yahweh; the people really believed that. However, we learn from Jeremiah that they were false prophets, diviners, dreamers, soothsayers and sorcerers! (Jeremiah 6:13, 7:4, 8:8, 10, 23:14, 27:9, 14, 16).

Some false prophets were identified: Pashhur, the priest and chief officer in the temple (Jeremiah 20:6); Zedekiah and Ahab (Jeremiah 29:23); Shemaiah, already in captivity, who sent an imperious letter to Jerusalem admonishing the church leaders to censure the "false" prophet, Jeremiah. But he, too, was busy spreading lies among the unfortunate exiles.
Many more false prophets remained unidentified. And what made them false? They were unwilling to admit that Yahweh would punish them for their oath-breaking; they refused to take seriously the curse of the covenant which, God had assured them, He would bring down upon them for their faithlessness.

***

In view of the above, we should not be too quick to associate the wicked of the psalms with the criminal element in Israel. There were, of course, those who practised their lies openly, such as the dishonest grain dealer. But the majority of complaints, especially in Jeremiah, are lodged against those who cover their abominable deception with a veil of sanctimonious piety. They proclaimed the Lie, according to which many in Israel fell. One wonders what thoughts crossed the minds of the exiles as they were herded onto transports and condemned to live in strange and hostile surroundings, far away from the precious temple of Yahweh. Were they reminded of the insidious words of their favourite prophets who told them what they wanted to hear? Or were they perhaps reminded of the renegade Jeremiah whose words of wrath and doom were still ringing in their ears? One thing is sure: by following their prophets, they had stumbled onto the bogs and quicksands of the Lie, from which, it seemed, they would never be saved....

***

Imagine the despair of the righteous in the time when the Lie reigned supreme! Take Jeremiah, for example, who struggled against the tide for forty long years! But all the true prophets faced and fought the hostile opposition constantly. The same is true today, except, perhaps, for the fact that the Lie today has the benefit of modern technological advances to speed its proliferation.... In addition to the spoken word, face to face, we
have the printed page, world-wide distribution centres and the electronic and computer age with its solid-state and miniturized circuitry! Mass media has been pressed into the service of the Lie. Both church and world groan under its tyranny. Yet, in the face of such global despair, Psalm 12 can give us the light and perspective we need:

Help, Yahweh; for there is no longer any that is godly; for the faithful have vanished from among the sons of men. Everyone utters lies to his neighbour; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak. May Yahweh cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts, those who say, 'With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is our master?' (Psalm 12:1ff).

Just as the Old Testament righteous lived among the wicked, so do we. The wicked are all those who are guilty before our Father. Their guilt may be a particular sin with which they stubbornly refuse to break; it may also be an arrogant way of life, an attitude of pride based on self-righteousness or self-sufficiency, which haughtily dismisses our God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But God is not misled by their phoney piety and humanistic self-righteousness.

The righteous still suffer, in many ways.... We pray that the book of Psalms may teach us and following generation how to pray and sing despite, and perhaps because of, the overwhelming hostility of the wicked, the arrogant, the sinners, scoffers and liars, the bloodthirsty and the fools....

However, we also pray that many wicked will yet cross over so that the Word of Yahweh to Ezekiel may come true: "But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins... and does what is lawful and right...he shall surely live;...Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says Yahweh God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (EzechieI 18:21ff).
Any book worth its salt should have an informative table of contents and a good introduction. The table of contents allows the reader to see the whole through the parts and an introduction shows the reader the intent and conviction of an author and also his audience. It is convenient and purposeful.

By those two criteria, the book of Psalms are indeed "worth its salt".

Psalms 1 and 2 are a combination of table of contents and introduction to not only the book of Psalms, but to the entire collection of Writings. Both psalms tell us the primary theme of the entire book: a) the life of God's people on the basis of the Torah (Psalm 1), and b) the regime of Yahweh and His anointed (Psalm 2). Furthermore, these two psalms describe to us the faith from which the psalms were written. It's the faith which commends the righteous who live by the precepts of the Torah, a life which will be blessed by Yahweh. It's the faith which assures the righteous who take refuge in Yahweh, because Yahweh will give them victory. Finally, it's the faith which tells the righteous that Yahweh will be on their side and that His Kingdom will come!

It is never wise to skip a book's introduction. But with the Psalms this is even more true. It's not by accident that Psalms 1 and 2 are at the beginning of the book of Psalms. Omitting these psalms will deprive the reader of an excellent guide which can illumine the entire book of Psalms and also the Writings.

I shall not discuss all the psalms. But however many we take, one thing is certain: we cannot omit psalms 1 and 2.

1. The remarkable place of Psalm 1.

One of the cardinal rules of exegesis is that
the text be discussed in its context. This is also true of Psalm 1. Psalms are often read individually, loose from other psalms, but Psalm 1 especially should be read in relation to its historical context. I readily admit that psalms can be read one by one, but the placing of Psalm 1 is so important, that I must devote some time to it.

***

Psalm 1 is the key which opens the Psalms! This may seem like a self-evident statement, but actually it's not. Because it's a key which opens two doors. It's probably more correct to say that it opens one door to two areas. In the first place, it opens the door to the book of Psalms; but, secondly, it provides access to the Writings, the third part of Holy Scripture after the books of the Torah and of the Prophets (cf. §1,1 and Genesis-Exodus).

Psalm 1 opens a) the book of Psalms
b) the Writings.

a) Key to the book of Psalms.

The order in which the 150 psalms appear in the book do not seem to follow a specific sequence. There was probably no systematic set of criteria for ordering the psalms. But psalms 1 and 2 are undoubtedly the exception. Their placement at the beginning was not accidental or haphazard.

***

It's possible that Psalm 1 was designed as an introduction to the Psalms; in any case, it cannot be proven or disproven. But there are a few good reasons for believing Psalms 1 and 2 occupy a very special place.

Some manuscripts of Acts 13:33 call Psalm 2 the first psalm. One might conclude that Psalm 1 was originally not part of the Introduction to the book. According to one Jewish tradition, however, Psalms 1 and 2 were originally one psalm. It is also remarkable that neither psalm bears an inscription,
which seems to confirm their "general" nature.

These reasons suggest that both psalms were intended as "Introduction" to the entire book. This supposition becomes more certain as we obtain more insights into the content of both these psalms.

***

First, Psalm 1.

Is there a psalm which is better suited as Introduction? Which psalm better sets out the great demarcation line between the righteous and the wicked than Psalm 1? Is there another psalm which is as clear about the characteristics of this polarity as Psalm 1? There is no psalm which is quite as to the point about the two respective sides as Psalm 1. "Yahweh knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish". Where else do we find the faith-expectation of the righteous summed up so precisely?

Psalm 1 was not an arbitrary choice for the Introduction. It's the key to, and the landmark through the land of the psalms. The quintessence of Psalm 1 is the quintessence of the entire book. It has been called a precis of the book of Psalms. That consideration will guide us.

b) Psalm 1 is the seam joining Prophets and Writings.

There is yet another reason for calling Psalm 1 placement in Holy Scripture remarkable. Scripture contains four parts: i) the Torah; ii) the Prophets; iii) the Psalms or Writings; and iv) the Apostolics of the New Testament.

Psalm 1 forms one of the seams which joins these parts together.

***

The first "seam" can be found between the conclusion of Deuteronomy and the first part of Joshua. It joins the books of the Torah to those of the Prophets. The manner in which this was done
deserves our attention.

How did the books of the Torah close? They closed with the admonition: "Israel, keep the Torah!" (cf. Deuteronomy 26:16 through Deuteronomy 33).

How did the books of the Prophets begin? They began by reiterating the Deuteronomy admonition: "Keep the Torah!" (Joshua 1; cf. Joshua).

***

The second "seam" runs between Malachi 4 and Psalm 1. It joins the books of the Prophets to those of the Psalms or Writings. And once again, the manner in which they are joined is striking! The last pages of the books of Prophets deal with distinguishing "between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him" (Malachi 3:18). And, for admonition to the righteous of his day, Malachi reached for the same injunctions we found in Deuteronomy and Joshua: "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel"! (Malachi 4:4).

And isn't it amazing that Psalm 1, the first page of the third part of Scripture, based itself squarely on the Torah?! What determines the difference between the righteous and the wicked, the distinction raised in Malachi? The difference is determined by their respective stances over against the Torah. And who is praiseworthy but he whose "delight is in the Torah of Yahweh"?

This conjunction, which we've called "seam" attests to the unity of Holy Scripture. Three of the four parts are joined to each other by the admonition "Keep the Torah!" And it's not surprising, because the whole of Scripture rests on the Torah, the law of God.

***

Part II of Scripture, the Prophets, is founded on the Torah.

Part III of Scripture, the Writings or Psalms,
is founded on the Torah.

Psalm 1 refers immediately to the Torah, thereby following closely in the footsteps of Malachi and at the same time introducing the book of Psalms and the remainder of the Writings.

c) Key to the Writings.

Psalm 1, then, opens the book of Psalms. I've called Psalm 1 the "signpost" through the land of the psalms. But this applies also to the entire book of Writings.

I have given an outline of the Writings in chapter 1. The Writings show immense variety: there are psalms, wisdom poetry, love poetry, the story of Ruth, lamentations about God's people, reflections on our daily work, a story of the Persian court, apocalyptic literature, and a history book from Adam to Artaxerxes.

I also wrote that these books form an integrated whole; they are not precious pearls lying scattered in a showcase, but a beautiful necklace, all carefully strung together. And both Psalms 1 and 2 can help us find the string which holds all these seemingly disparate books together.

First of all, Psalm 1; as guide through the book of Psalms and the Writings, it identifies all the main themes found in these books.

The first of these themes is the front between the righteous and the wicked.

2. The front identified.

Scripture draws a very distinct line, a demarcation line, between the righteous and the wicked. We have studied that in chapters 3 and 4. Now for a brief recapitulation.

a) The righteous.

The righteous in Israel were those who did not
desert the constitution of the covenant which God had made with Israel at Horeb or Sinai. They observed the covenant faithfully. These righteous were known by a great number of synonyms which we have discussed in §3, 2.

These righteous were primarily poor people. Words such as righteous, poor and suffering are synonymous in the Psalms. They may have been impoverished farmers who had been victimized by the more powerful, exploiting Israelite neighbours. Furthermore, there were the widows and orphans, known throughout the ancient world as the "suffering". Finally, there were the Levites, who, because they lacked land and any other base for income, were often the "have-nots". They relied primarily on the good graces of others for their survival, and when, in times of wide-spread covenantal oath-breaking, they were uncared for, they suffered inexplicable deprivation. In short, the righteous in the Psalms were the same exploited masses Jesus addressed in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1ff).

Among these masses, the Psalms originated. The Psalms might well be called "the Psalmbook of the Remnant of Israel", the remnant being that minority of Israelites who remained true to their oath. Their suffering was discussed in chapter 3.

b) The wicked.

Diametrically opposed to the righteous were the wicked, those who were "guilty" before God, on the basis of their oath-breaking. They were also Israelites, but they had only an appearance of piety, and lacked the power of it (II Timothy 3:5).

These "men of unrighteousness" were primarily the rich in Israel. They were often coldblooded, merciless figures, who, when they had rejected the Torah and its social justice, proceeded to milk their less powerful neighbours dry. They were discussed in chapter 4.
c) This polarity, or front, in the first Psalm.

It's significant that the polarity is found right at the beginning of Psam 1. This was not done by accident! The front is very important to an understanding of the Psalms and Writings. Our entire life of prayer and praise is predicated on it. The Prophets close with references to this front, and the Psalms (Writings) pick up the theme immediately. And the New Testament follows suit. The first pages of the New Testament have John the Baptist alluding to the threshing-floor where the wheat is separated from the chaff.

It was because of Psalm 1, the Introduction to the Psalms, that I decided to begin the book with a discussion about the polarity, the front, or the demarcation line between the righteous and the wicked. It is of fundamental importance to recognize this front for a proper understanding of Scripture. We know that from Psalms 1 and 2.

Let's turn it around for a moment. Let's assume that this demarcation line, this front, does not exist. Let's consider God's people from the "ecumenical" point of view, as an undivided mass of "believers", all with their own, individual "religious concepts" about "God" and "Jesus". What would we do with the Psalms? We should have to dismiss them, because they simply do not "fit" into any of these concepts. The Psalms, we should have to admit, are just not "loving" or "compassionate" enough; they're much too "Old Testamental"! They are all too "vengeful". We would be much better off with the "evangelical, revivalist hymns" of the previous century. Am I being too extreme? But where, in these hymns, do you read about the front between the righteous and the wicked, a front, by the way, which Yahweh Himself has drawn out?

The spirit of ecumenicity clashes "frontally" with the spirit of Psalm 1.
3. And yet, the righteous are blessed!

"Many are the afflictions of the righteous", complained David (Psalm 34:19). The Psalms provide an extensive summary of these afflictions: poverty, repression, exploitation, persecution, conspiracy, falsehood, deception, scorn, nets and traps. An outcast like David had experienced them all, and he has aired his feelings in many prayers but also in many praises. Bloodthirsty men drew the bow and unsheathed the sword all too readily against God's elect. Greatly dismayed, the faithful turned their griefs and sufferings over to Yahweh. Yahweh would judge their cause and bring His judgment over the wicked. And yet, Psalm 1 does not begin with a curse; instead, it pays tribute to the righteous!

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers! (Psalm 1:1).

The Law shows the Way.

The Law was a treasury full of sound counsel which Yahweh had given Israel. The counsel did not simply apply to "worship" practices, but to the whole
of life: treatment of slaves, interest rates, loans, harvest, scales and a myriad of other ordinary, daily-life concerns. The counsel was "unto Israel's life". Its purpose was for healing; its objective was to create full and growing life in the covenant.

Moses once recapitulated full life in the covenant, under the Law, as follows: "You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you...." (Deuteronomy 5:33). Many psalms, including Psalm 1, also compares the life of a man to a way (Psalm 37:5, 91:11; Proverbs 16:9; Job 31:4; Isaiah 40:27; Jeremiah 10:23). Sometimes the "way" refers to all our situations in life; at others, it refers to a "way of life", our behaviour and our deeds. Scripture often uses this beautiful imagery, as in "walking the ways of Yahweh". "When thou dost teach them the good way in which they should walk" (II Chronicles 6:27). That way was first of all through the Torah. The Torah was the sign-post in the Israelite's walk through life. It was the "good way of life", "the way of thy precepts' (Psalm 119:27,32ff.). In our present dispensation, this means believing in Christ. "And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another...." (I John 3:23). He became the way, (John 14:6), "the way...that leads to life" (Matthew 7:13; cf. 22:16; Luke 1:79). Acts summarizes our life of faith as "the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17), or simply "the way" (Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22).

The counsel of the wicked.

But what about the wicked? What way have they chosen? They have chosen to flout God's precepts and admonitions and have elected to live according to their own principles. As such, they have their own "counsel". We should not, however, associate this with a "city council" or a "church council", but rather with counsel or advise as a spiritual principle.
They are the principles of wicked Israelites or modern-day Christians. The Hebrew word for "counsel", --eetsa-- appears in the context of Absalom's request of Ahithophel: "Give your counsel; what shall we do?" (II Samuel 16:20,23). It was counsel or advice of the elders which king Rehobeam rejected (I Kings 12:8,13). The counsel of Yahweh, which He gave through the appointed elders and prophets in Israel, was scornfully rejected by the wicked.

Scornful rejection or faithful acceptance of Yahweh's counsel--the words of the Torah--marked the difference between the righteous and the wicked. "Who is the man that fears the Lord? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose" (Psalm 25:12). He was righteous, as was Asaph: "Thou dost guide me with thy counsel" (Psalm 73:24). Asaph expected to be counselled by Yahweh. Psalm 119 calls the precepts of the Lord "counsellors" (verse 24). But the wicked always knew better than the Lord. They had no need of the Torah. They felt superior to anything Yahweh could teach them; the Torah was beneath their dignity. They preferred to advise themselves. A good example was the Judaean king Ahaziah, who "walked in the ways of the house of Ahab, for his mother was his counselor in doing wickedly. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as the house of Ahab had done; for after the death of his father, they were his counselors, to his undoing" (II Chronicles 22:3ff.; cf. Micha 6:16). Scripture cites many more examples of "walking in the counsel of the wicked".

Some Christians may confuse such "walking" with cinema attendance, gambling or "doing the town". Yet, would it not be more meaningful to apply such "walking" to false prophecy in Israel? (Jeremiah 23:9-32). There were so many instances of false counsel given by those prophets who proclaimed on the basis of self-illumination: Pashhur, Hananiah, Ahab and Zedakiah (Jeremiah 7). It's safe to say
that wicked counsel through false prophecy made as much a mockery of God's Torah as did those who committed all sorts of social injustices or those who lived in immorality! The Old Testament church certainly did not escape the "counsel of the wicked"!

The way of sinners.

I have previously pointed out that the wicked were not only those who committed gross, overt sins. The wicked were primarily characterized by their proud, haughty and arrogant way of life in which they persisted despite the warnings of the true prophets of Yahweh. They persisted in their disobedience. Their predominant attitude was: "who needs God or His Law? we can easily shift for ourselves!" Often, they covered up this pride with a mask of superficial piety, which made them "respectable" in the eyes of others. They were self-righteous. And while the Torah was the sign-post in the life of the righteous, pride was the sign-post in the "way of sinners" and the "way of the wicked" (Jeremiah 7:23ff.).

In the long run, of course, such a "way" begins to show in public. They managed to fool the masses most of the time, but the righteous were not fooled at all, or at least not for long. There were those who defiled the Torah by exploiting the poor; others defiled the Torah by persecuting those sent by Yahweh; still others defiled the Torah by refusing to feed the hungry or withholding drink from the thirsty (Isaiah 32:6). Some of the other atrocities have been listed earlier (cf. Amos8:6; 2:7). That typifies the "way of sinners".

How radically opposite is the "good way" as Solomon called it. The "way of sinners" through life is actually little more than continuous stumbling, always missing the mark, always blindly blundering onto quicksand or thin ice, or anything which lacks solid footing. The Hebrew word for "sinner" used by Psalm 1
Puts the plight of the sinner into clear focus: missing the goal, getting side-tracked, losing one's footing. In short, it's the exact opposite of "the way of walking with God". "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micha 6:8).

The seat of scoffers.

Earlier, we have seen how christians readily confuse the "seat of scoffers" with a variety of places "of ill-repute". I suggested that we may have to alter our thinking somewhat. Why, in certain cases, could such "seats" not be equated with pulpits, or, as mentioned earlier, chairs of theology in some universities? The seat of scoffers is not occupied, in first instance, by the most outrageously profane, but by those whose self-righteousness elevates them above God's Law. The pride may be carefully camouflaged, but the pretense to autonomy and self-sufficiency is there nevertheless.... Peter and Jude were plagued by scoffers in their congregations, so we can reasonably expect to find them in our own. Whether, as in the cases of Peter and Jude's communities, the scoffers deny the imminent return of Christ, or they sow division in some other fashion, they are motivated by their pride, carefully veiled, of course, by a show of outward piety (II Peter 3:3ff.; Jude: 18ff).

Not so the righteous!

The thrice-mentioned fact that the righteous in Israel did not walk in the counsel of the wicked, did not stand in the way of sinners, and did not sit in the seat of scoffers, emphasises the radical difference between the wicked and the righteous.
However, the righteous were not like the monks of later centuries who withdrew themselves from the society of men. Else they would have "needed to go out of this world", said Paul in I Corinthians 5:9. The righteous avoided the principles of the wicked and their attitude and walk of life. They did shun the wicked; they allowed, and, indeed, encouraged interaction to take place, but they would not associate themselves with the intent of the wicked's life. This isn't narrow isolationism; the righteous did not avoid the wicked because they thought they were better, but because they knew, first of all, that the way of the wicked led to perdition, and, secondly, that the way of the righteous was the only one which made any sense to them. It was, after all, the Way of Yahweh, the way in which they found peace.

This principial detachment characterizes the righteous throughout Scripture (Psalm 26:4ff.; Proverbs 1:10-19, 4:14-19; Ephesians 4:20; I John 2:15-17). When the godfearing Jehoshaphat temporarily forgot this principial separation and allied himself with the godless Ahab in a war against Ramoth in Gilead, the seer Jehu, son of Hananiah prophesied against him: "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord? Because of this, wrath has gone out against you from the Lord" (II Chronicles 18, 19:2). This, despite the fact that both Jehoshaphat and the Ephraimites were members of the same covenant, and were therefore brothers! (II Chronicles 11:4, 28:9-11). Thus it often happened that the faithful righteous were separated in principle, not just from "the world", but from their own apostate brothers! Alone, with the Word and because of the Word!

Briefly, Psalm 1 opens by portraying the separation in principle between the wicked and the righteous, by pointing out two distinct ways of life and two distinct circles of counsel, reflecting
two divergent attitudes towards God and his Law.

Verse 2:
    but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
    and on his law he meditates day and night.

Whereas Israel frequently deserted Yahweh's covenant, the righteous in Israel formed a minority, a Remnant. These righteous were characterized, in a negative sense, by their spiritual separation from the majority, and in a positive sense, by their obedience to God's Word. That Word was their delight and formed the basis for their existence.

***

The righteous loved God's Word! That Word, the "law" of Psalm 1 should not be seen as a penal code with a multitude of strict requirements, however. That mistake was originally made in the Hebrew rabbinic tradition and has been adopted by the christian church. With oftimes disastrous results! (Leviticus, ). Many christians have viewed the Law of Moses as a kind of religious labour contract with impossible demands! I'll return to that error in the discussion of Psalm 15. To identify the law of Moses with the concepts of the Judaistic and Pharisaic traditions would render Psalm 1 unintelligible.

The "Law" of the Psalm 1 is not a punitive code of harsh legalities. The word "Torah" was to the Israelite what the word "education" means to us (Genesis-Exodus, ). The "Torah" was the body of instruction Israelites gave to their children (Proverbs 1:8, 3:1, 6:20,23, 7:2, 13:14). God had given the "torah" to His children in the desert as a body of learning, not as a series of forbidding restrictions. And, as we have seen earlier, the instruction covered much more than worship affairs, but extended to all areas of Israelite life. Is the Torah a book of laws and requirements? Rather, a large part of Genesis,
Exodus and Numbers is the history of how God dealt redemptively with His people. The Torah tells us how God became Israel's King, how He established covenants with His people, and how He came to live among His people. And how can the precepts of the Torah be considered "harsh, dry-as-dust legalities", as was often done in the rabbinic-pharisaic tradition? The precepts inspire, and illumine, the broad spectrum of Israel's total life, a life which Yahweh intended would result in innumerable blessings! The righteous we meet in Psalm 1 was certainly not someone who groaned under the oppressive burden imposed by the law. On the contrary, it was his delight! He was not the forerunner of those legalistic purists, the Scribes and Pharisees, who delighted, not in the law, but in making life impossible and joyless for their followers. Psalm 1 simply operates on a different level entirely. The righteous in Psalm 1 was someone who rejoiced in Yahweh's instruction concerning Israel's redemption from death and satan by way of reconciliation through sacrifice.

What was the "law" referred to in Psalm 1? Was it only the law of Moses? One is tempted to think so. The scrolls containing Mosaic writings, the law in other words, was available at the time of the psalmists, though perhaps not in its present form (Joshua 1:8; Deuteronomy 6:6, 11:18ff., 17:19). But we have also seen how the various parts of Scripture were joined by what we called "seams". The end of Deuteronomy and the beginning of Joshua joins the books of the Law and the Prophets with the invocation: Observe the Law of Moses! Malachi 4 and Psalm 1 are similarly joined with a reference to the Law. This particular phenomenon makes us think automatically of the Law of Moses.
But, since the word "torah" could also refer to other bodies of instruction, such as given by parents, elders, priests and prophets, perhaps the law of Psalm 1 includes the prophetic books of Joshua, Judges and Samuel as well, and possibly also the psalms of David. However, this poses no problems, because in the final analysis the content of instruction is the same, whether it be the Law of Moses alone, or whether it be the Law plus the Prophets. The principles of the books of the prophets are the same as those of the books of the Pentateuch. All laws originated with the primary source, the Torah of Moses. Regardless of whether the law of Psalm 1 includes the Prophets, the parallelism between Psalm 1 and Joshua 1, the two seams, is striking.

The wicked in Israel despised and defiled that Law, but the righteous observed and rejoiced in it. They preferred the Word of God to thousands of pieces of gold and silver (Psalm 119:72). Its words were sweeter than honey (Psalm 119:103). It was a source of joy and wisdom to the righteous (Psalm 19:8ff., 119:98,24,77,92,143,174).

The righteous of Psalm 1 actually meditated on the Law. He was not content with a cursory reading of the Law. He studied the Law in order to retain it. The truly righteous are busy with God's Word night and day. It's possible that regular prayer (Daniel 6:11; Mark 1:35; Luke 2:46ff.) took the form of regular readings and meditations of God's Law. This is something different than being "religiously" busy reading a breviary, as the monk was wont to do.

Was the Torah available in book form to the psalmist? It's not impossible. In Deuteronomy we read that Moses "had finished writing the words of this law in a book" (31:24). And Joshua referred to "this book of the law [which] shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it
day and night", words strongly reminiscent of Psalm 1 (Joshua 1:8; cf. II Chronicles 22, 14:4; Psalm 16:7, 63:7, 119:97ff., 148). In any case, Moses had commanded the following about the Law: "And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:6ff., 11:18-20). Anyway, the Israelite may not have had the Law in book form as we know it; still, he was intimately acquainted with its contents and taught them faithfully to his children, night and day.

Briefly then, the righteous of Psalm 1 were recognizable through i) their separation in principle from the wicked and their life-style, and ii) their constant devotion to God's Word. And if, because of that, they often appeared to be poor and oppressed, remember that in fact they possessed incomparable wealth and lived under the protection of Israel's King: "Blessed is the man...."

***

Verse 3:

He is planted like a tree
planted by streams of water,
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.

Such metaphors were, of course, much more meaningful to people living in arid, desert climates than to us. Hagar and Ishmael, and later the entire nation, nearly perished in the desert (Genesis 21; Exodus 15:24, 17:2; Numbers 20:4). This is powerful imagery in a land where the desert was only a stone's throw away. The streams probably referred to ancient methods of irrigation, which enabled vegetation to flourish even in periods of extreme drought. Despite the periods of "drought" suffered by the righteous, they were always assured of the steady, life-giving stream provided by God's Word.
As a tree is nourished by the water tapped by its roots, the righteous are nourished and bear fruit as a result only of the life-giving Word of God: "In all that he does, he prospers". This may seem ironic to the undiscerning eye; after all, wasn't it the righteous who suffered? Wasn't it their enterprises which had failed, their fortunes which had been ruined? Beneath the ofttimes lamentable surface, however, the life of the righteous in Israel was a blessed one. "Many were the disasters of the righteous", and, undoubtedly, many righteous would have concurred with that. And yet, their lives bore fruit "in its season", as Psalm 1 has it. Just look at Joseph, Moses, David, the prophets and apostles. Consider also people like Hannah and Elkanah over whose lives hung the shadow of a childless marriage. But their prayer and perseverance paid off; they bore fruit "in its season", according to the time specified by Yahweh. Their son, Samuel, became king David's tutor; it was he who brought the message of hope to the faithful during the apostate times of the Judges. Even "the memory of the righteous is a blessing" (Proverbs 10:7).

Verse 4:

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff which the wind drives away.

This image is the more striking when compared with the one about the righteous. The righteous are like trees, permanent, rooted in solid ground, fed by a constant supply of life-giving water; the wicked are like chaff, separated from the valued grain on the threshing-floor and scattered into oblivion before the evening sea breeze. After all, what else is to be done with chaff, except perhaps to be used by crooked grain dealers to defraud the poor?
This, too, provided comfort to those whose existence was being made almost unbearable by the wicked. While it seemed that the wicked enjoyed nothing but good fortune and affluence and the righteous nothing but adversity, the true facts point to the contrary: the righteous are like fruit-bearing trees and wicked worthless chaff!

***

Verse 5:
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

The faithful of the Old Covenant also knew that Yahweh would judge the world (cf. Isaiah 1:25, 2:12ff., 13:6,9, 22:5, 34:8; Ecclesiastes 12:14; Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17). They only did not know that God would give the judgment of the world into the hands of His Son (John 5:22; Acts 17:31). On that Day it would be fully revealed that it was not the righteous, but the wicked, who are to be pitied. On that Day the meek would possess the land (or earth, Matthew 5:5), and "delight themselves in abundant prosperity" (Psalm 37:11). But sinners will perish from the earth (Psalm 104:35). All the repressive and unjust wicked, of whom we read throughout the Bible, shall disappear as chaff driven by the wind (Job 21:18; Psalm 35:5; Isaiah 17:13, 29:5, 41:15; Hosea 13:3). They didn't bother with the Signpost, or Torah, of Yahweh, and, at the time, it appeared that they had made a fortunate choice. But the way of life they had chosen ultimately ran dead (Psalm 37:10, Psalm 73; Matthew 3:12). That end is not yet in sight; but it will be revealed by Him, known to old Israel as the Angel of Yahweh and to us as our Lord Jesus Christ, in the final Day, the Day of Judgment over the living and the dead.
But verse 5 is not just about the Last Judgment. Admittedly, the history of Israel, like that of the Christian church, had its times of injustice and apostasy. But there were bright moments as well. "So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and equity to all his people" (II Samuel 8:15; cf. I Kings 3:28, 4:20, 25). During his reign, the wicked were undoubtedly judged by the law of righteousness, which was then the law of the land (cf. Psalm 101). There were other wicked whose fate was decided then and there, such as the assassins Ahab and Jezebel, who were punished vengefully by Yahweh for their heinous crimes. The dogs of the street licked their blood. Saul committed ignominious suicide. Herod was consumed by worms. The false prophets, Pashhur and Hananiah, fanatical opponents of Jeremiah, came to a premature death (Jeremiah 20:6, 28:17). They were all wicked who were punished before the last Judgment. Their lives were comparable to chaff: impermanent, rootless, fruitless and futile...... They disappeared from the congregation of the righteous and, thence, from the face of the earth (Psalm 104:35; cf. Psalm 37:20, 68:3, 112:10).

***

These words form a profound introduction to the book of Psalms. There appear in the psalms many more grievances against the wicked. But Psalm 1 also establishes the basis upon which the psalmists wrote their songs: the Judge of all the earth shall call into judgment, whether now or in the Day!

***

Verse 6:
For the Lord knows the way of the righteous; but the way of the wicked will perish.

We often use the verb "to know" in a detached, scientific way. We observe things and thereby obtain knowledge. But biblical "knowing" implies
a much more intimate relationship between people. It can mean understanding, but then a much pro-
founder understanding than merely acknowledging the facts. Sometimes, biblical knowing is almost syn
onymous with empathy. Often it means "love".
A man can "know" his wife; we usually add "in the biblical sense", meaning that the biblical usage
of "to know" is considerably richer and more expansive than our usage (Genesis 39:8; Proverbs
12:10).

According to the psalmist, this is how God knows the righteous. He knows all about them, He has compassion for them, He understands their suffering, He commiserates with them, He has even marvellously taken their burdens and sorrows from them. "Yahweh has searched the righteous and known them! He knows when they sit down and when they rise up; he discerns their thoughts from afar. He searches out their paths and their lying down, and is acquainted with all their ways" (Psalm 139). "The eyes of Yahweh are toward the righteous, and his ears toward their cry" (Psalm 34:15). "He has kept count of their tossings; put their tears in his bottle! Are they not in his book?" (Psalm 56:8). The righteous are constant
ly under His protection: they are His loyal covenant partners.

***

Recognition of this covenant relationship is imperative. Archaeological studies of ancient compacts, charters and covenants point out the technical meaning of the verb "to know". To know was synonymous with "to recognize", in the sense that a lord recognized, not only his vassal, but also his own obligations toward that vassal. The same was true, of course, for the vassal. Both sides recognized their positions as well as the benefits and obligations of those respective positions. Each respected the other and vowed
to remain faithful; to break faith was not only a denial of the other party in the covenant, but it was also an open invitation to disaster.

We can't help but pay attention to the covenantal dimension of the word "knowing". I said earlier that knowing included compassion, love, understanding, empathy. It also includes covenant fidelity. Why, if the faithful were subjected to almost constant persecution, were they still called "blessed"? Because Yahweh knew their way, He knew that their loyalty to the terms of His covenant would not go unrewarded; He also knew that they knew that He would remain loyal and deliver the promised redemption!

Psalm 1 establishes the basic theme of the entire book of Psalms: the God whom the psalmists praised, and to whom they prayed is merciful and loyal! His loyalty and covenantal fidelity "extends to the heavens", His faithfulness "to the clouds" (Psalm 36:6).

The basic themes.

This finishes the first introduction to the book of Psalms. Several themes have been identified. Various others will be added in our study of Psalm 2, thus completing our overview of the Psalms.

Recapitulating briefly, Psalm 1 has shown us the following main themes:

1. The polarity between the righteous and the runs right through the book of Psalms. The righteous were generally poor but always true to the covenant; the wicked were usually rich and always scornful of the covenant.

2. Each category had its distinct counsel: the righteous followed the Torah of Yahweh; the wicked followed their own principles. Each walked his own way of life: the righteous
in the way chosen by Yahweh; the wicked walked in their own pretended autonomy. Each occupied his respective seat: the righteous sat close to the altars of Yahweh; the wicked selected the circle of scoffers, men of sovereign will and sovereign ways.

3. Psalm 1 did not pity the righteous. On the contrary, the righteous, so long as they persevered in the way of Yahweh, were "Blessed".

4. Characteristic of the righteous was their spiritual separation from the life-style and fellowship of the wicked. They did not seek monastic isolation, other-worldly withdrawal. They were driven into isolation from the spiritual apostasy of the day by the Word of God to form a cohesion or community of the righteous, known as the Remnant.

5. The righteous were indeed to be congratulated! From a strictly secular standpoint, they were apparent failures; when seen by the light of God's promises, however, they were eminently successful, people whose lives bore the fruits of holiness. They walked the way of eternal life, in contrast to the sterile, dead-end way chosen by the wicked.

***

In addition to introducing the book of Psalms, Psalm 1 also introduces the Writings. I shall return to that in the next chapter.
Psalm 2 can, of course, make meaningful reading by itself. However, its content and place in the canon make it one of the two introductory psalms. Again, its role as introductory psalm is two-fold: it opens the way to the book of Psalms but also to part III of the Bible, otherwise known as the Writings (or Psalms, though for reasons of clarity, I will refer only to "the Writings" from now). In the previous chapter, I mentioned that some Jews combined Psalm 1 and Psalm 2. This practice is understandable, because both psalms clearly form the beginning of the book of Psalms and the Writings. That covers the place of Psalm 1 in the canon. As far as the content is concerned, both psalms deal with the front or polarity between the protagonists and antagonists of God and his Sinai covenant. The psalms complement each other even though their respective illuminations of the demarcation line differ.

Traditional translations have somewhat obscured the meaning of certain key words in Psalm 2. A reading of the Revised Standard Version, for example, would not suggest that the demarcation line depicted in Psalm 2 is the one which separates righteous and wicked within Israel, within the boundaries of God's people, and within today's Christian church. But the front in Psalm 2, as it was in Psalm 1, refers to the division internal to the covenant community. That's what ties the two psalms together.

Psalm 1, you may remember, described the opposition in Israel to Yahweh and his Torah. The wicked disregarded this signpost and chose instead to follow their own way and principles. To all appearances, they had chosen wisely: the wicked lived in affluence and enjoyed great power,
while the righteous, who painstakingly followed the Torah, seemed always to live in misery and despair. Psalm 1, however, puts the picture right: the suffering righteous are blessed, because Yahweh is their Defender and he has promised them the Future. And, contrary to all 'self-evident facts', the wicked's self-chosen pursuits will ultimately lead to disaster. The righteous will bear fruit richly, while the wicked will be blown away...

Psalm 2 is about that same front. But here the wicked oppose and resist, not the Torah, but Yahweh's messiah, His sub-king in Israel. And while the opponents are sometimes identified as heathen nations, the principal and most dangerous opponents were renegade Israelites, who, having turned against the Torah of Yahweh, also subverted the cause of Yahweh's anointed. Without naming names, Psalm 2 once again focusses on the enemies among God's people. These renegades reappear in every psalm. Psalm 1 described them as having their own counsel, their own way and their own seat; Psalm 2 describes them as having their own god (Baal?) and their own ambitions to rule: "Away with Yahweh and his vassal-king, David".

***

The books of the Law and Prophets can tell us a great deal about the relationship between yahweh and his anointed. And their descriptions are echoed throughout the Writings. There are praise psalms glorying the Kingship of Yahweh. There are lamentations about the degeneration and decline of David's royal house (Psalm 89 and Lamentations). There are prayers for the solidification of the throne. There are appeals for the coming of David's Son. There are grievances, complaints and cries by the righteous poor, who suffered unspeakably because the Lord's anointed himself had deserted covenant ways and had plunged
the nation into depravity and ruin. Read the books of Kings and Chronicles....

Both psalms establish complimentary confessions of faith. The confession of Psalm 1 is: "And yet Yahweh is with the righteous". The confession of Psalm 2 is: "The Kingdom of Yahweh and His messiah shall win the final victory". These two confessions are the two keys to the Psalms.

1. A psalm of David?

Did David compose Psalm 2? The psalm bears no inscription, so there's no way of knowing for certain. The early church seems to have thought so; here's what they prayed following the release of Peter and John from prison: "Sovereign Lord, who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who by the mouth of our father David, thy servant, didst say by the holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage....'" (Acts 4:24ff.). Whether that proves that David authored Psalm 2 is questionable. It may just have been "a manner of speaking", the way we sometimes refer to the Psalms as the Psalms of David. They probably also took their cue from II Samuel 23:1, in which David is called "the sweet psalmist of Israel". He may have composed most of them; he was certainly the psalmist par excellence, as Solomon came to be known as the author par excellence of the book of Proverbs.

It's impossible to determine the authorship of psalm 2. The language suggests that David could have been the author. Many psalms, it now seems, were written during the days of the early Monarchy, and someone has observed that the "archaic flavor" possibly points to the tenth century. In any case, we may observe in passing that if David did not write the psalm, perhaps he should have. Certainly, the internal conditions which are described, and
which focus on resistance and revolution, are entirely consistent with conditions which King David experienced. But the experiences were not limited to King David. The fundamental pattern of injustice and suffering recurs constantly in the history of God's righteous people. Psalm 2 is one of the most frequently quoted by the New Testament; accordingly, it has many fulfillments.

***

That last word, the plural "fulfillments" requires explanation. I am going to postpone study of Psalm 2 in order to devote some space to that question. How can the psalms be fulfilled? No one would question the fact that prophecies can be fulfilled, but how can this be said of the psalms? Once that's been established, we'll see Psalm 2 how has been fulfilled many times in church history, in anticipation of the final fulfillment.

2. Psalms, too, can be fulfilled repeatedly.

The New Testament tells us that, in addition to the prophets, psalms can also be fulfilled (Matthew 13:35 re-Psalm 78:2; Luke 24:44 and John 13:18 re-Psalm 41:10; John 15:25 re-Psalm 69:5; John 19:24 re-Psalm 22:19). There are no less than 101 quotations from or references to the Psalms in the New Testament! Psalm 2 can claim fifteen of these (Matthew 3:17; Acts 4:25, 26, 13:33; Hebrew 1:5, 5:5, 7:28; II Peter 1:17; Revelations 2:26, 6:15, 11:15, 11:18, 12:5, 17:18, 19:15, 19).

But in order to understand the nature of fulfillment in the Psalms, we must first dismiss a common misunderstanding about the nature of prophecy.

For many, prophecy is simply predictions of the future, and fulfillment is the coming true of such a prophecy, its realization. Accordingly,
biblical prophets were people whose main purpose was to predict the future. And when later their predictions came true, their prophecies were said to have been "fulfilled".

I shall not deny that prophets also wrote about the future. Micah, for instance, prophesied that the Lord Jesus would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:1). Jeremiah prophesied the death of the pseudo-prophet, Hananiah (Jeremiah 28). Both predictions came true. When taking all the writings of the prophets together, however, we can safely conclude that the prophets of Israel predicted next to nothing. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that fulfillment can apply to promises which God made to His people and which He later honoured.

In an overwhelming majority of cases, the prophets proclaimed God's Word to their own, contemporary situation. They said little about the future. In fact, they spoke more of the past than of the future (Judges 6:7-10; Jeremiah 2; Ezechiel 16; Hosea 11:1, etc). A pagan oracle is primarily concerned with what his god will do tomorrow. What will happen tomorrow? The veil of the future must be lifted.... The true prophet of Israel, however, speaks of the Name of the Lord, which means he inquires what God has done in the past and what, therefore, he requires of us today. The prophet predicts practically nothing. The commandments of today are founded on redemptive acts established in the past: D. Holwerda).

Yet we read in Hosea: "...Out of Egypt I called my son " (Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:15; cf. Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:17ff.), concerning Israel's past. How can this be fulfillment? How can it be said of a prophecy concerning the past that it later came true?
To be able to live Scripture, we must realize that God's Word is not a supra-temporal "book of piety", or a system of religious "truths", or, for that matter, a collection of timeless religious proclamations. The Word of God was spoken and written in a particular historical situation. It addressed itself to that historical situation. Scripture is not supra-temporal, but situational (term used by author; because of confusing connotations, however, it may be preferable to use "relevant"). And this is not only the case in so-called "historical" books of the Bible -- "historical" is also a misleading term, as we've pointed out when we decided to revert to the original partition of Scripture --, but applies as well to the Pauline epistles and the book of Revelations. They are all historical books, in that they were written in particular historical situations, and therefore bear historical relatedness or relevance. There has always been a strong temptation to read books of the Bible outside their historical context as if they contained and proclaimed isolated, eternal concepts. This is not the case. We must take note of the times and conditions to which the Word of God was originally proclaimed. All books bear a date in time, in history. We must set aside the tendency to think in terms of general concepts and theological systems from which we would presumably attempt to explain Scripture. Without the historical situation, the date in which the particular Bible book was written, the passage is meaningless.

It is clear that particular historical situations appear to "repeat" themselves. In any case, this is true of fundamental patterns. Specific details may differ, but often the main characteristics of one age may surface at a later time. Biblical- and church-history also display this repetition in fundamental patterns. Included are historical
situations portrayed in the book of Psalms.

A clear example is Psalm 22. Here, king David was obviously in a bad way. He has been forced to flee his home. He has lost everything, including his clothes and his wife (I Samuel 19:12). He even felt that Yahweh had abandoned him. He complained bitterly: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?...they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots" (Psalm 22:1,18). This complaint about a genuine, existential distress situation cannot be turned into an alleged prediction of how Jesus would suffer on the cross.

But, centuries later, the Lord Himself hung on the cross and experienced similar distress, including the feeling He had been abandoned by His Father. He, too, used the same words David had voiced before Him. And when John described how the soldiers cast lots for Christ's garment, he quoted Psalm 22: "They parted my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (John 19:24). Was John trying to demonstrate that Psalm 22 had finally been fulfilled? Not at all; Psalm 22 was not a prediction of how Jesus would feel forsaken by God and how His clothes would be taken. Psalm 22 was David's complaint, reflecting David's anguish. But the fundamental pattern of history was repeated in the suffering of Jesus. The situation, in its essence, surfaced again centuries later. The message and implication, of course, was stronger in this "renewed situation". The outline of the situation sketched by Psalm 22 received renewed reality in the situation surrounding Jesus' crucifixion. The psalm "began to speak again", only this time more powerfully than it had in David's time.

This is how the psalm was fulfilled. This was not "realization" of an earlier prediction. The psalms are not predictions about the future made by a Hebrew poet of Antiquity; they are
sketches of situations recorded by the pen of the poet. Such poetic sketches can begin to live again, repeatedly. Much of Scripture has been fulfilled in this fashion in the life of our Saviour; the fulfillment has reached the epitome through His incarnation. If anyone had occasion to cry: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" it was Christ, even more so that His ancestor David. When John wrote: "This was to fulfill the Scripture", he undoubtedly meant this represented the climactic fulfillment of earlier historical situations. Psalm 22, and many others besides, may be said to have been fulfilled, without having been prophetic.

Other psalms have similarly been fulfilled in the lives of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel and many others who found themselves in situations which had previously been experienced by others. The psalms are still being fulfilled in our lives when we find ourselves in situations whose fundamental patterns resemble those of, say, David or Asaph. The details of such situations may differ, no doubt; but if the fundamental patterns are identical, there is fulfillment. Of course, no psalm will ever again reach that level of fulfillment which was achieved by our suffering and triumphant Saviour, Jesus, the perfect righteous One, as He walked the way of God's obedience despite the obstacles thrown His way by the erring church leaders of His day....

The language of the psalms makes emulating them, in prayer and praise, easy for us. On the one hand, they are situational, that is, applicable to the historical situation of the day, but on the other hand, Hebrew poetry favoured the use of certain expressions, literary devices and metaphorical language which emphasized the fundamental patterns in the situation but deliberately obscured the details. These characteristics give the psalms a relevance which spans time and space and makes them perfect models for our varying situations.
3. First motif: Rebellion against Yahweh and his messiah, vs 1-3.

Psalm 2 is made up of four parts. Each has a different motif. Verses 1-3 sound the defiant cries of rebels against Yahweh and His sub-king. Verses 4-6 present Yahweh's reaction to this defiance. The sub-king himself is heard in verses 7-9. The psalmist's conclusions are registered in verses 10-12.

Verses 1-3:

Why do the nations conspire, and the people plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us'.

These lines portray the fundamental pattern of insurrection and revolt so lamentably characteristic of ancient Israel and our own church. The pattern, then, is rebellion against Yahweh and his messiah.

a) Yahweh and his messiahs.

A sound, reliable, thorough translation is a beautiful thing. Yet, sometimes, in very special cases, we would be better off not translating the original. Such is the case with the Hebrew word maschiach, which has been corrupted into "messiah", meaning "anointed".

When we hear the word "messiah" we immediately think of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we wonder, when reading Psalm 2, whether the psalmist was predicting the resistance with which Jesus would be met. If that were the case, however, the psalm would have been unintelligible to the righteous of the psalmist's day. But it was not the case, and there is a good reason for the appearance of the word "messiah" in the psalm. In the first place, the words "messiah", "christ" (Greek) and "anointed" mean the same thing. Secondly, the righteous in the Old Testament had known many "messiahs".
The Hebrew applies the term "messiah" to the priests of Yahweh, and especially to the kings who were anointed at their coronation. Even the renegade Saul was known as "messiah". When David's men proposed that he should kill Saul, David replied: "Yahweh forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, Yahweh's messiah, to put forth my hand against him, seeing that he is Yahweh's messiah" (I Samuel 24:6; cf. 12:3,5, 16:6, 24:11, 26:9,11, 16,23, II Samuel 1:14,16). Our translations usually have "the Lord's anointed", but the original has "Yahweh's maschiach". David himself was also known as "messiah": "Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed Yahweh's messiah?" (II Samuel19:21; cf. 23:1). And during the dedication of the temple, Solomon concluded his prayer thus: "O Yahweh God, do not turn away the face of thy messiah!" (II Chronicles 6:42). In other places, the title is applied without naming the ruler (cf. I Samuel 2:10,35; Psalm 2:2, 20:7, 28:8, 84:10, 89:39,52, 132:10; Lamentations 4:20). The word "messiah", then, was not reserved for Jesus only, but was applied to Saul, David, Solomon, and their successors in Zion. Of course, Jesus was the greatest of these.

The language of Psalm 2 was not occult or cryptic for the Old Testament reader. It did not refer in some shadowy, vague way to events of the future. Psalm 2 was probably written with someone like king David or king Hezekiah in mind. Only the fulfillment of the psalm occurred repeatedly in future situations which were similar, at least in fundamental pattern, to those experienced by the psalmist. The fundamental pattern, it will be remembered, was defiant revolt against Yahweh and physical insurrection against Yahweh's messiah. That pattern cropped up time and again. The starkest manifestation of this pattern erupted when all the world rose against the Son of God, the greatest
Messiah of all time, our Lord Jesus. But even that was not the ultimate fulfillment! Defiance, revolution and disobedient confrontation will not be resolved in this age, but will continue until the Last Day....

b) Who and where were the rebels against Yahweh and his messiah?

We hear rumbles of revolt in the first part of the psalm, verses 1-3. Kings and potentates are mobilizing their forces. We hear revolutionary slogans and whispers of plots and conspiracies against Yahweh and His messiah-king in Zion....

Where were these conspirators and revolutionaries to be found: within Israel or outside? The answer to that depends on how Psalm 2 is translated. Should we read "The kings of the earth" or, as is also possible, "The kings of the land"? The Hebrew ereṣ could mean "earth" or "land". It's even possible to read "The kings of the city", as there were many city-states in ancient Israel.

Kings of the earth or kings of the land?

If the reader decides for "kings of the earth", as has happened with most Bible translations, the Psalm assumes a more global meaning. And because we do not know for certain who authored Psalm 2, it could very well be that the historical situation alluded to in the psalm refers to any, or even all, of the foreign enemies Israel had, right from the Division of the Kingdom down to the Maccabees. Even during the time of Davidic hegemony, Israel had many vassal states such as the Ammonites and the Moabites. Some of these repeatedly rose in revolt against the supremacy of David, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah and Jotham (II Samuel 10; II Chronicles 20, 26, 27; Ezra 4:20). These revolts by tributary states often took place between the time the old king died and the new one took his place. Psalm 2 has according-
ly also been called a "coronation-psalm". But if, as I have explained before, the very name of Yahweh represents the gospel of redemption for Israel, then it is pointless to think of heathen nations in the context of this psalm, since heathen nations did not worship Yahweh and, therefore, also did not consciously revolt against Yahweh. It's not likely that the subject peoples constituted much of a threat to the throne of David in times when Israel observed the covenant (Leviticus 26:6-8; Deuteronomy 28:7,10,13). And when Syrians, Assyrians and Babylonians descended upon Israel, it was not to rise in revolt against Yahweh and His messiah, but they were sent as instrument of wrath by Yahweh! God is not always on the side of His people, but I'll deal with that in Psalm 46. At any rate, I prefer the translation "The kings of the land" since it fixes the centre of revolt against Yahweh and His anointed in Israel, an interpretation which is much more consistent with the remainder of Scripture. I do not exclude the revolt of a vassal-king as described in II Samuel 10, but even the Ammonites occupied land which had been promised to Abraham. This may seem like too ancient an interpretation of the word "land", but ancient Israel was accustomed to thinking in terms of the "land which God had promised Abraham". However that may be, I repeat that to translate erets with "land" is more consistent, in my opinion, with the overall message of the Old Testament. (Note also: the present state of Israel is officially known as Erets Yisra'el).

***

The reference to "kings" and "rulers" should present no problem either. The traditional translation has led us to think almost automatically about foreign rulers, the powerful kings of Assyria, Syria, Babylon and Egypt. But Scripture does not
restrict its use of the word "kings" to rulers commanding large empires and huge armies. It can also mean regional or local authorities, such as kings of city-states within Israel. The cities of Sodom, Jericho and even Ai all had their kings. A good Bible concordance will yield many more such kings. The kings of Psalm 2 could well have been Israelite authorities holding local or regional jurisdiction, who, because of thirst for power, rose in revolt against Yahweh and His elected messiah. Many were the clashes between the messiah of Jerusalem and the rebellious house of Jeroboam. Many also were the confrontations between the Baal priests, rulers in every sense of the word, and the true prophets in the service of Yahweh and His messiah. Words such as "kings" and "rulers" should not prevent us from identifying the real enemy, the revolutionary upstart within Israel's own covenantal existence. This interpretation should then also be applied to our own church-covenantal existence.

Heathens or Israelites?

The reader may at this point object that Psalm 2 speaks of "nations" and "peoples". However, we should not immediately associate those words with "nations" or national identities as we know them. Similarly, "peoples" does not necessarily mean an independent, modern country with its own national identity. This association has also presented problems within the modern state of Israel, as we all know. Who, then, were "the nations"? David used the same word --goyim-- for his Hebrew enemies (Psalm 59:6). There appears to be no reason for equating "peoples" and "nations" with the heathens dwelling beyond Israel's boundaries.

According to this interpretation, verses 1-3 concern Israelite authorities within the promised land. As such, Psalm 2 complements what Psalm 1 said about the wicked. They were upstarts and wicked who had been born into the covenant of Yahweh.
The point of the prophecy in Psalm 2 is probably much more refined than we have been led to believe by so-called "global" interpretations of the psalm. This is especially true if we consider how the New Testament apostles, driven by the Spirit, explained Psalm 2. To them, it was Israel, not the heathen nations, which was the centre of resistance to Yahweh and His messiahs.


Following is a summary of New Testament references to Psalm 2. I wish to pay special attention to the target of prophecy concerning the peoples and nations mentioned in Psalm 2. Is the target Israel or the heathen world?

Matthew 3:16,17:

And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased".

This, of course, was the bone of contention during Jesus' days: was he or was he not the Messiah? Israel had rejected and crucified Him. The "kings of the land" --Israelite authorities-- and their following had risen openly against Yahweh and His messiah. But Matthew, apostle to the Jews, wanted to prove to the Jews, on the basis of their own Law and Prophets, that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah promised of old by Yahweh. That's why the gospel-writer appealed to Psalm 2 ("You are my son, today I have begotten you"), in the hope of convincing the rebellious Jews that their revolt was against their own God. Matthew saw that the front ran right through God's own people.
Hebrews:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, (Psalm 2:7) whom he appointed the heir of all things (Psalm 2:8).... (Hebrews 1:1ff.)

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee" (Psalm 2:7) (Hebrews 5:5; cf. 7:28).

The Jewish christians to whom this epistle was written were in danger of relapsing into Judaism which was hostile to the Messiah Jesus. At the time, Judaism still had its mighty temple, and was making converts from among Jewish christians. This would have been a disastrous fate for those early Jewish christians, but Judaism was bent on discrediting the Messiah, the Son of God. It was difficult to resist the persuasive plotting carried on by the Judaists; it was equally difficult not to succumb to the threats and violence Judaists inflicted upon those christians. It was imperative that they remained true to Yahweh, true also to His Word, which revealed Jesus as the Son of God, higher than the angels (Hebrews 1 and 2), higher even than Moses (Hebrews 3 and 4) or Aaron (Hebrews 5 and 6), the Messiah who was both high priest and king, as Melchizedek had been (Hebrews 7-10).

Paul knew the value of the Old Testament to the righteous in Israel, which is why he relied so heavily on disclosing the promises of the Old Testament. Psalm 2 was quoted by Paul to point out that the source of resistance to Yahweh and His Messiah originated in Israel, among the Hebrews, not in Rome, Athens or Alexandria.

II Peter 1:17:

For when he received honour and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased (Psalm 2:7)."
This epistle warned against "false prophets among the people", who deny the Ruler "who has bought his people". And Peter himself had been present when God had named the Messiah "my Son". This reference to Psalm 2 is yet another indication of the revolt and resistance within the confines of the covenant.

Revelation 2:26ff:

He who conquers...I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces (Psalm 2:9), even as I myself have received power from my Father.

References to idolatry, adultery and other forms of immorality are often allegorical in Scripture. They usually always refer to covenant oath-breaking. The image of unfaithfulness is clear. It was the vilest of all sins, as I've explained earlier, and it was committed by members of the church of Thyatira! No mention here of pagans, heathens, Romans or Greeks; the Thyatiran christians stand accused of oath-breaking; they were the ones who had rebelled against Yahweh and His Messiah. But the victors in this church struggle were given the promises of Psalm 2.

Revelation 6:15ff:

Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals...hid in the caves... calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the thone, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?"

In this passage, John envisioned the judgment over Jerusalem, city of blood, killer of prophets. Contrary to what has generally been accepted, this is not a reference to a universal judgment over the world, but a curse on the city which has deserted its alliance and has killed the emissaries of Yahweh. The seals gave access to the covenant judgment. The quote from Psalm 2:1 places the passage in a cove-
Revelation 11:15ff:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever..."

And the twenty-four elders...fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give thanks to thee, Lord God almighty, who art and who wast, that thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but thy wrath came..." (Psalm 2:1).

From the context, it's clear that the nations mentioned were faithless Israelites. The location is none other than Jerusalem, "the great city which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their (!) Lord was crucified" (verse 8). In his vision, John saw the corpses of Yahweh's emissaries, his faithful prophets, lying in the streets of Jerusalem. He also saw the beast ascending from the bottomless pit --in Jerusalem (verses 7,8). It was Jerusalem which had rejected the Messiah; it was her inhabitants, not the peoples of the far-flung regions of the globe, who had risen in defiance against the Messiah. The passage does not allude to universal political trends, so we look in vain for political predictions. Revelation 3:3 marks the target of this passage: they were those who said they were Jews, but were of "the synagogue of Satan", in other words, Israelites. 

Revelation 12:5:

She brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron (Psalm 5:9); her child was caught up to God and to his throne....

Revelation 11 was about Jerusalem which had killed the prophets. Revelation 12 describes the
source of revolt against the coming of the Messiah Jesus as well as against his work. The source is Satan, but his henchmen were people of the church! The dragon raged in Jerusalem, the Holy City, the city which had committed "adultery", that is, oath-breaking, and had rejected and murdered the Son of the Most High. It was from Jerusalem that God took His Son.

In his gospel, John described how Jesus Himself had delineated the front between the righteous and the wicked during His stay on earth. By "world", John did not mean the mass of unbelieving humanity, but rather Jewish churchleaders hostile to the Messiah. Dr. C. vander Waal has the following in "Revelation", part of the series Search the Scriptures: "Understanding the gospel of John would be much easier if we realized that the "world" mentioned by John was, in fact, the Jewish world of the first century, with Jerusalem as its centre. We could almost say that the world and the Jews are one and the same. The world persecutes and hates, but that world is not, in first instance, pagan Rome or "the evil world", but the Jewish world, those who "will put you out of the synagogues (John 16:2)". With regard to this treachery to the covenant community, Jesus accused the Jews who rejected Him: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires" (John 8:44). The background to Revelation 12 is also the revolt of Jerusalem against the Messiah.

***

"Then the dragon was angry with the woman -- after God had taken the Messiah--, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus", that is, the faithful christians who were severely persecuted by the "synagogue of Satan" (Revelations 12:17). As comfort to the victims of this fanatical persecution, John recalled
the words of Psalm 2:9, the Messiah will soon break the power of the bloodthirsty with a rod of iron! Again, Revelation 12 also quotes Psalm 2 in a covenantal context.

Revelation 17:18:

And the woman that you saw is the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth.

The"great city" was seemingly first of all the Jerusalem of John's day. That Jerusalem was given power over the kings and rulers of the land, such as the Jewish authorities and members of the synagogue and the sanhedrin. They sent their agents, such as Saul of Tarsus, hither and yon to arrest the followers of the Messiah (Acts 9) 17 . Great was the suffering among the saints, both in terms of physical beatings, discrimination, economic boycotts, imprisonment and even death. 18

Revelation 19:11,15,19:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True...From his mouth issues a sharop sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron (Psalm 2:1, 8,9)....And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who sits upon the horse and against his army.

"You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes" (Matthew 10:23; emph. added). "There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (Matthew 16:28; emph. added). Our Saviour had spoken these words before His ascension. What did He mean? Was He referring to His final coming? Actually, He was referring both to His coming in A.D. 68-70, to punish Jerusalem, and to His coming in the final judgment.
This two-fold prophecy was entirely consistent with the manner of prophesying used by the prophets of old, who also superimposed prophecies of the near future on those of the more distant future. Similarly, Christ's announcement of judgment over Jerusalem was superimposed on that of His final judgment. In any case, He did return in 68-70 in order to pass sentence on rebellious Jerusalem, the harlot of Revelation 17 (Matthew 24).

John was acquainted with the dual nature of Jesus' future coming. But in the visionary Revelation, Jesus gave John further instruction. Revelation 19 reveals the judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Long the seat of the "beast", it was now called to account for its false prophecy and its rejection of the Messiah. "And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray", Jesus had told His followers; these prophets were the "kings of the land", the "rulers" in Israel which Jesus came to judge in A.D.70. The "kings" mobilized their forces for war against the Rider on the white horse. But He rose forth to disarm them and to "shepherd them with his staff of iron (Psalm 2).

Again, these are not predictions of the future course of world events. The message is very concrete, painfully concrete to those "kings" in Israel, erstwhile members of the covenant community, who had committed treason to the covenant by rejecting God's Messiah and daring to raise their fists to His face. But the message to the church is a universal one, and will retain its relevance through time and space.

Insurrection among God's own people.

A brief summary is in order. Psalm 2 is all about insurrections against Yahweh and His Messiah. The insurrectionists can be found among the people of Israel. This has been confirmed by the apostles who repeatedly appealed to Psalm 2 when addressing the Jewish people. The insurrections originated in Israel and were carried out by God's own people.
Psalm 2 is not about abstract, universal politics, but about rulers and kings in Israel who had flung their challenge in the face of God. Furthermore, the nations which followed these Jewish leaders of the synagogue and sanhedrin were not the unconverted masses of the world, but members of the covenantal community. That is the "fundamental pattern" of Psalm 2.

The apostles recognized the conditions described in Psalm 2 in their own time. It is striking that Paul never once appealed to Psalm 2 in his epistles to non-Jews. Striking to us, at any rate, since we have become so accustomed to reading Psalm 2 with predominantly global presuppositions. It probably wasn't very striking to Paul; in fact, it's not likely that it ever occurred to him to quote Psalm 2. Why should he? The "historical situation" just did not allow it! The "fundamental pattern" of Psalm 2 was repeated, not in the gentile world, but in the Jewish world of the first century. Jerusalem, the bloody city, the harlot, had denied its God and killed His emissaries. Jerusalem was the centre of persecution of the early church. Then and there, there was "great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (Matthew 24:21). The apostles saw in the Jewish leaders and prominent churchmen the "kings of the land" so hostile to the Messiah. They saw the renewed fulfillment of Psalm 2 take place in the "birthplace of God's covenant".

***

The prophetic impact of Psalm 2 is much more real than if we succumb to speculating endlessly on what the prophets were forecasting. The church has done that, too, of course, and, in fact, is still doing it today. But we don't have to worry whether the kings and rulers are the superpowers or the "yellow peril"(!), or the Common Market, or perhaps some terror which has yet to be spawned. John's
world was the world of the Jews, of the Judaic covenantal church. The revolt was conducted by the wicked in Israel, disguised as pious, godfearing men.... The fundamental pattern of this dangerously deceptive church was its denial of, and opposition to, the Messiah of God's choice. It's a pattern which repeats itself all too often in the history of the modern church. That's why Psalm 2 is so terribly relevant. That's why it will always remain relevant and always be in a state of perpetual fulfillment. The front, so clearly defined in Psalm 1, now runs right through the baptised christian church. The real conspirators against God and His Messiah are sooner found in church councils and synods or in theological faculties than in the praesidium in the Kremlin or the party leadership in Peking!

"Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us!" That's not the sort of slogan that churchmen would choose to carry around with them openly. Yet there are many today who have scornfully cast aside the ties which bound them to the covenant and have chosen to be a law unto themselves, as if to say: "Away with this Messiah; we can fend for ourselves!"

Rebellion against God and His Messiah(s) has, of course, no meaning. That's the tenor of Psalm 2. It asks: "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?" as if to say: what on earth do they hope to achieve? Don't they know that scorn of the Almighty will only bring the Almighty's wrath?

4. Second motif: He who sits in the heavens.
   Messiah's realm is God's holy hill.

The righteous in Israel must have reacted with shocked disbelief at the repeated revolts against the messiah-king. After all, the fate of Zion, God's holy hill, the peace realm, was strongly dependent on the role of the messiah-king. If faithful, the
messiah-king could be instrumental in establishing a kingdom of peace under the rich promises of Yahweh. But we also read in the books of Kings and Samuel what damage could be done by wicked messiah-kings such as Saul. Also, Psalm 2 draws a parallel between "the king" and "the ruler" or judge; for all practical purposes, these words are synonymous. There was, in Israel, a close connection between the sanctity of law and proper litigation on one side, and the righteousness of the king, the highest judge, on the other. The close connection emphasizes the extent to which the civil rights of the poor and peace in general were dependent on the ruling king.

Woe to the poor in Israel if the messiah-king himself was threatened or overthrown. Something of that nature happened after the death of Ahaziah, when queen-mother Athaliah assassinated all the royal house of David, except prince Joash (II Kings 11:1ff.). What was the fate of the righteous prior to the reforms carried out by messiah-king Josiah? What passed through Josiah's mind when he was confronted with God's Word, which Israel's evil priests had suppressed for so long? II Kings 23 is one long register of covenant violations, with every iniquity imaginable. What passed through the hearts of the believing Remnant except the sentiments aired in psalms such as 44, 74, 79, 80, 89, 102, 106, 120?

The climax of fulfillment was reached in our great Messiah Jesus. Just as the righteous in Israel expected so much from their messiah-king, we expect everything from our Messiah: the present, the future, forgiveness of sin, the renewal of our hearts and lives and of this whole earth, our resurrection from the dead and life eternal.....And just as the righteous in Israel suffered, with pangs of anguish, the increasing degeneration of communal life in Israel, we are forced to witness the growing alienation from God in our own church circles....Many call into question Jesus' Messianic role; they call into question His
incarnation as Son of the living God; they doubt His victory over death and hell; they deny him judgment over the living and the dead....
What, then, will become of his glorious Kingship? The psalms of lamentation for Zion are alive and relevant, today (Psalms 74, 79, 102, etc). Let's take heart, however; the matter of the Messiah's Kingship is, thank God, in his hands!

Verses 4-6:

He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill".
Three times God laughed at the ambitions of men.
This was one of them (cf. Psalms 37:13; 59:9).
I personally find this reaction gripping. In the first place, the psalmist did not introduce him as "God" or "Yahweh", but as "He who sits in the heavens". Sitting on high, what were men and their affairs to Him? We know what the righteous meant to Him. But what about those who openly rebelled against Him, or who pretended that He did not exist? "Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket", wrote Isaiah, "and are accounted as the dust on the scales. All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness" (Isaiah 40). It's not surprising that He laughed when these tiny drops and dust particles rose in rebellion! It's not surprising that He held them "in derision", when they dared to challenge His Messiah. Wrote Daniel: "He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings" (Daniel 2:21). Have church and state lost sight of this awesome relationship? In his perilous fury, He thundered to the upstart peoples: "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill!"

Those who seek to displace Yahweh's Messiah will have Yahweh to reckon with. As far as that's
concerned, Israel's Old Testament kings, such as David, Asa and Hezekiah, were only messiahs who had been sent by Yahweh. And even the supreme Messiah, Jesus, was only God's servant sent from on high to effect our redemption. But behind David, and behind Jesus, stands Yahweh. Rebelling against, or even killing, the Lord's messiah does not end the matter. There is still "he who sits in the heavens" to deal with. The kingship of David was not David's affair; the Kingship of Jesus is not, in first instance or final analysis, Jesus' affair. The Kingship of the Messiah, the holy hill of Zion, is, as terrible as it may seem to those who rise in defiance, God's affair.

***

Ancient Israel and modern Christianity have often forgotten that cardinal point. Often Israel relied on its own contrived machinations to protect themselves from foreign enemies. They banked on armies, horses and chariots, political alliances and diplomatic duplicity. Saul, for example, did not really believe that the kingship was God's, and felt obliged to place his faith in armed might. But David understood that his life was not his own, and, as true servant-king, learned to wait upon the Lord and his never-failing help. This is why Psalm 2 is thoroughly "Davidic". David confessed: "Thine is the kingdom, O Yahweh" (I Chronicles 29:11), and translated this confession into practical messianic deeds.

But Jesus was the supreme Messiah, and knew himself to be the Servant of God. He fulfilled Psalm 2 in a way unlike any before. He knew, and believed, that the Kingdom was his Father's and that he had been sent to accomplish the Father's work (Isaiah 42:1-4; Matthew 12:18-21; Acts 3:13, 26, 4:27,30). He often spoke of the "works of God", for which he had come (John 9:3), "the works of him who sent me" (John 9:4). He confessed "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (John 4:34.
This confession formed the basis of his trust in the promises of his Father: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18; cf. John 5:17). God the Father guarantees the royal rights of His Son, the Messiah Jesus (Revelation 3:21, 12:5).

***

Throughout the ages, Psalm 2 has been a source of comfort to the righteous. Not a moment passed, it seemed, that the faithful were not suppressed and persecuted. As for the present, consider the means, the power, the intellect, the capital which is available to those within the Christian church to wage war against the Word of God, who has come into this world to bear our suffering and secure our salvation. Where does the Messiah meet the most painful opposition than within the church itself? Isn't it primarily leaders within the church who deny His Divinity, His resurrection from the dead and His return? And yet Psalm 2 also delivers a message of comfort for today: all the pretentious ambitions of men, including those within the church, will come to nothing; the matter is in God's hands, and He laughs about the futile efforts of men to discredit and displace His Messiah. Is there any doubt about the outcome of the confrontation? The resolution of the matter is this: "You are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (I Corinthians 3:23).

5. Third motif: The messiah discloses the promises Yahweh had given Him, verses 7-9.

Yahweh had promised Israel that the relationship between Him and the house of David would be of Father to son. A more intimate relationship cannot be imagined. The third motif of Psalm 2 reminded Israel of this Divine decree.

Verses 7-9:

I will tell of the decree of Yahweh: He said to me: "You are my son, today I have begotten you."
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

Someone might object that the above verses conflict with our idea that Psalm 2 addressed itself first of all to the messiah-kings in Israel. Does verse 7 not refer specifically to the coming of Jesus? How could David and Hezekiah claim to have been "begotten" of God? Is Jesus Christ not the only eternal, natural Son of God? (H.C.L.D. 13; cf. John 1:14; Hebrews 1:1; John 3:16; I John 4:9; Romans 8:32). The psalmist did not know the Messiah Jesus, after all.... This is true, of course, and yet the theme was a familiar one and was recognized instantly by the psalmist's contemporaries.

Ancient Egyptian kings were believed to have descended from the gods. They were said to be Sons of god. The pharaohs were all presumably conceived by some god or other. They were themselves gods incarnate, according to Egyptian religion. Subject Canaanite kings sometimes addressed the Egyptian pharaoh as "my gods, my sun-god". To preserve their alleged divinity, and to keep it in the family, pharaohs frequently married their sisters, or, as happened in one case, a daughter. Their names reflected their divine origin: "son of Re", "son of Amon". Mesopotamian rulers did not go quite so far, but archaeology has presented us with an ivory panel showing two Canaanite princes feeding at the breasts of a goddess. Scripture, of course, does not know such deification of the ruler, and we run no danger of minimizing the immense difference between God and man. But how are we to explain the words "You are my son, today I have begotten you"?

It reflects the wording of an adoption certificate widely used in the Near East. Various excavations have proven the fact that adoption by childless parents was a common practise in the Near East. At the formal adoption ceremony, the father...
would say to his adopted son: "You are my son, today I have begotten you." The New English Bible has: "today I have become your father". The expression was widely known and referred to a fairly common event.

***

Can we apply this usage to Psalm 2:7? II Samuel 7 might throw some light on this. David, it is written there, wanted to build Yahweh a house of cedar instead of the tent in which He had always dwelt. And although that honour was reserved for Solomon, Yahweh was so pleased with David's gesture that He promised to build for David a royal house, a house of flesh and blood, which the Lord would forever bless. Concerning Solomon, Yahweh promised David: "I will be his father, and he will be my son" (II Samuel 7:14; cf. Psalm 89:27). Such was God's decree: Davidic kings would be adopted as sons by Yahweh.

It is also possible that, in addition to borrowing terminology from adoption certificates, Psalm 2 also borrowed coronation- and covenant terminology, used by some ancient middle eastern states. In Egypt, for example, when a new king was crowned, a charter was drawn up which gave the new ruler legitimacy in the name of some deity, and, indeed, deified the ruler as the son of god. The word "decrees" or "statute" could also refer to such a charter legitimizing Yahweh's king in Israel, and, together with the adoption terminology, endorse him as the --adopted-- son of God.

This comparison with the traditions of other nations appears to be valid, because we have earlier come across expressions which had been borrowed from ancient covenant terminology. Furthermore, the meaning of the terms "decrees" or "statutes", as they appear in Psalm 2:7 and II Samuel 7, is thoroughly covenantal. Therefore, we should not avoid using these terms, even though they also appeared in a non-covenantal context in other lands.
The kings of Israel were, needless to say, not sons of god, in the sense that they were believed to have been conceived by a god. The concept of adoption which is suggested in Scripture, pre-empts that. He was not "begotten" from eternity, as the theological usage of the word "decree" might imply, but he was begotten "now", that is, at the moment of God's choosing He was adopted as the one chosen by Yahweh to become His messiah-king. Whether that happened at the coronation or at some other time is not clear. It's possible that David was already adopted at his anointing by Samuel. It's not unlikely that more was said at Jesse's house than was committed to writing. If that's the case, if David was adopted at his anointing, then the novelty of II Samuel 7 would be God's promise to extend the adoptive relationship to David's heirs as well.

***

(If the previous paragraph is confusing, it could be omitted; the author would probably agree; he goes on to say.... --tr.)

***

However that may be, Psalm 2 is definitely an echo of II Samuel 7. Verse 4 begins with a very profound confession of faith, "I will tell of the decree of Yahweh....", which is no small thing, considering the colossal might which was arrayed against the messiah-king ("The kings of the earth --read: land-- set themselves --read: rebel-- against Yahweh..."). They were weaving their nets of intrigue and shouting their blasphemous denials against the Lord and His anointed. And what was the king's reply? Did he arm himself to the teeth and march out to slay his opponents? No, because he had a mightier weapon, a stauncher defense. He appealed to the decree of Yahweh, God's promises to the house of David.
David's confession focusses on one of the cardinal points in Scripture which is as true now as it was then. It should be more clear to us now than it was to David, because Jesus Christ has come to bring the prophecy of Psalm 2 to its ultimate fulfillment. The cardinal point is this: If God's messiah is challenged --as he was in verses 1-3--, it becomes God's affair --verses 4-6. The messiah-king does not conquer his enemies; God does it for him (Psalm 110:1; Hebrews 1:13, 10:13). The messiah-king has only to realize and confess that he is God's son, and God Himself will break all resistance. The decree, whether applied to David, as messiah-king, or to Jesus, as the Great Messiah, will completely confound all anti-messianic or anti-christian resistance. As son of God, the messiah-king was also God's heir, giving him the following rights:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
And the ends of the earth your possession,
You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

If we render the Hebrew eretz "land" instead of "earth", we avoid the hyperbolic language commonly used in the courts of ancient middle eastern potentates. And, anyway, as I have noted before, the land promised to Abraham was much larger than that eventually occupied by the Israelites. It covered the area between the Egyptian river --roughly 150 km. southwest of Jerusalem-- to the river Euphrates (Genesis 15:18; cf. Numbers 34:1-12; Joshua 1:4, 13:1-6; cf. also Joshua, ).

David did what Yahweh had commanded: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the land (!) your possession". When he started, he had only the city-state Hebron, an inauspicious beginning. And even after seven years, the Philistines still occupied numerous enclaves. Such had been Saul's legacy.... At the end of his reign,
however, he, or rather, God, had dethroned the "kings of the land" like "potter's vessels". Even Damascus was in David's sphere of influence (Psalm 18:44). The kingdom David turned over to Solomon reached "from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt" (I Kings 4:21,24). A fairly accurate match-up with the description of Genesis 15:18! And a true son of David had only to ask for it! And no one could deny him the right! If anything, Psalm 2:7-9 is thoroughly Davidic. ***

Again though, the ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 2 is reached in the Messiah Jesus. The words of verses 7-9 are much clearer when applied to Him and His rightful position before God. He alone is the "eternal, natural Son of God", who humbled Himself to become God's Servant and our Mediator. We have seen, from several New Testament passages, how the ancient coronation rites were applied to Jesus. At His baptism, God declared "This is My Son..." (Matthew 3:17). At His glorification, God spoke through the flashing cloud,"This is My Son!" (Matthew 17:5). The words of Psalm 2 were repeated again in the Hebrew epistle: "For to what angel did God ever say 'Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee'? Or again, 'I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son'?" (Hebrews 1:5ff.; cf. 5:5, 7:28; I Peter 1:17). And as "heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:2), He could rightfully ask for the things promised in Psalm 2:8. Satan had tempted Him with the overlordship of the world, and, pretending it was his to do with as he pleased, had tried to wheedle Jesus: "All these I will give you --note the allusion to Psalm 2:8!--, if you will fall down and worship me" (Matthew 4:8ff.). Only Jesus obediently chose the way of suffering the Father had given Him, whereupon He could exclaim, with justifiable faith in God's promises: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18; Leviticus, Numbers-Deuteronomy, ).
Again we see the fundamental pattern of resistance repeating itself, this time in the age of the christian church. The pattern continuous to be repeated, and, time and again, the response must be the same: "You are my son...Ask of me and I will give the nations your heritage". The norm for this response is this: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says Yahweh of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6; cf. Psalm 20:8). And, like David before Him, Jesus also received the fulfillment of God's promise, that His enemies would be brought low before Him (Hebrews 10:13). The content of the gospels since Jesus' coronation could be summarized in the words of Psalm 2:7-9. The fulfillment of these prophetic words has made Messiah Jesus heir of the whole world and has made us "fellow heirs" (Romans 8:17). His enemies, those who have risen in defiance against Him, will be reduced to shattered pieces of a useless vessel....

The rebellious Jews did not have long to wait for the interim fulfillment of that prophecy. Their city, Jerusalem, the hot-bed of revolt against Yahweh and His Messiah, was reduced to rubble at a cost of over one million lives. This judgment was pronounced in the book of Revelation. The final fulfillment of Psalm 2, however, will only take place following Christ's return, when He will come to judge the living and the dead. God will authorize Him to crush His enemies as a vessel is broken. He will come, clothed with Divine majesty, to disclose to His enemies, demons and pious hypocrites alike, what the ultimate resolution of Psalm 2 will bring: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession". And even the shadowy world of the christian church will pass away, to be succeeded by God's Kingdom, ruled through the Spirit of Christ....
6. Fourth motif: Admonition to serve Yahweh and His messiah, verses 10-12.

When a High King of the ancient near East met resistance or rebellion from one of his vassal kings, he preferred to send his messengers rather than his armies. First came the warning and, failing that, then came the punishment. The warning was always couched in the usual, diplomatic language, which made the proceedings very formal. He didn't just send a verbal message. The sins were usually too grievous for that. Felony, or covenant oath-breaking was no small matter. And all the official legal jargon, the "wherefores" and the "therefores", boiled down to the not-so-subtle warning: shape up, or else...! And often, this threatening phraseology and other niceties in which diplomats and mandarins were enough to do the trick. Whoever said, 'the sword is mightier than the pen'? And, having been reminded, very stiffly, of his treaty obligations, the hapless vassal was allowed a moment --but not much longer-- to choose between penance and extinction....

The language of protocol also introduces the final motif of Psalm 2. It is the language of the agreement, the pact, the treaty, and it is applied to the covenant. It is, simply put, an ultimatum, relating to the terms of the covenant. And also for that reason, I feel that Psalm 2 is about rebellion against Yahweh and His messiah among God's own people.

Verses 10-12:

Now therefore, 0 kings, be wise; be warned, 0 rulers of the land. Serve Yahweh with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.
"Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezekiel 18:23).

Despite the solemn warning of the psalm, its conclusion shows the Saviour's great love. Cessation of revolt would mean avoiding God's wrath. Even at this late hour, the psalmist appealed to the wicked in Israel to repent of their ways.

The verses also provide comfort to those suffering under the heel of the oppressors and rebels. The comfort is implied in the ultimatum itself. In effect, God demands of the rebels that they surrender. Is this ultimatum yet another example of the ongoing litigation between Yahweh and the upstart nation, which was one of the primary themes in the books of the Prophets? As I observed earlier, Yahweh had not just sent one emissary to warn His people. They came and went, one after the other, for many decades and centuries. When, one might well ask, would Yahweh's patience come to an end?

The last line pronounces the benediction upon those who seek their strength in their Suzerain and His messiah-subking. The psalm has come full circle. It began with a blessing and it ended with one. This repetition emphasizes the fact that all the instances of revolt and rebellion to which the wicked aspired were transitory in nature. All their hopes, their schemes and their armed resistance will be swept away. By contrast, the blessing is given, and the blessing is permanent. The righteous are to be congratulated, despite their apparent doom. I have mentioned this in connection with Psalm 1 also. Oppressed, yet blessed; poor, yet blessed. That, however, was not something you could see. It had to be accepted in faith, "the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

Having reached its initial actualization in David and his successors, the conclusion of Psalm 2 continues to function prophetically, because it anticipates the reign of the Messiah Jesus. "Ruler..."
continues to function prophetically, because it anticipates the coming of the Messiah Jesus, "ruler of kings on earth" (Revelation 1:5). What would be more futile than for His subjects to resist His rule, thereby inviting His covenant wrath? It would instead be wiser not to oppose Him but to acknowledge Him as the great Messiah-King, the Son of God, who is worthy of all our praise. The choice is still open to us: we can bow the knee now, in humble submission to our Sovereign, or have it bent for us in the Final Day (Philippians 2:10ff.; Revelation 11:15).

This is not the sweet, servile Jesus known in some circles. If there was any question about that, Revelation 6:15ff. will quickly lay that to rest. The Jesus we'll see in the Final Day will a true Sovereign, from whom His enemies will want to hide in the ground and the caves. Happy will be those who have chosen to seek their refuge in Him; less fortunate they who have chosen to live their lives in defiant rebellion, guided by the slogan "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us". Happy those who have willingly given the matter of their redemption, their righteousness and their victory over death to the Messiah Jesus, and have not relied on their own strength and contrived means!

7. The fundamental pattern of Psalm 2 thrice repeated.

Psalm 2 had multiple fulfillments. Or, better perhaps: it describes an historical situation whose fundamental pattern was oft repeated in subsequent times, until its crucial fulfillment in Messiah Jesus. Following are some illustration of fundamental pattern repeats.

I. The fundamental pattern.
A. Verses 1-3: Rebellious Israelite rulers sought to overthrow David and his heirs.
B. Verses 4-6: Yahweh, sitting in the heavens,
B. Verses 4-6: Yahweh, sitting in the heavens, derided their attempts and served notice that revolt against His messiah meant war on Him.

C. Verses 7-9: The imperilled messiah appealed to God's decree which had established that the messiah-kings of the house of David would rule Israel.

D. Verses 10-12: An ultimatum from the High King reminded the rebels of their treaty obligations and advised them that further rebellion was useless. Blessings to the faithful subjects of Yahweh. No matter how great the peril, Yahweh's promises would prevail and secure the kingdom.

II. Israel in A.D. 33-70.

A. Verses 1-3: The "kings" and rulers of the land of Israel --synagogue and sanhedrin-- conspired to kill the Messiah and persecute His followers, if necessary with Roman help.

B. Verses 4-6: The revolt against the Messiah immediately involved God, who sent His message of "the coming wrath" (Matthew 3:7; Luke 21:23).

C. Verses 7-9: The Messiah honoured the uniqueness of His kingship. He rejected all physical defenses and appealed to the Divine decree. Satan offered Him all kingdoms on earth, but Jesus remained obedient to His Father. Prior to His ascension, He confessed His faith in the words of Psalm 2; cf. Matthew 28:18: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me".

His apostles proceeded to proclaim to all "that God has made him both Lord and Christ...." (Acts 2:36, 13:33, 18:28). In the book of Revelation, Jesus Himself comforted the persecuted Jewish and Gentile christians in the early church with references to Psalm 2: 7-9; (Cf. Revelation 2:27, 12:5, 19:15).
D. Verses 10-12: The New Testament proclamation to the Jewish world repeatedly bore the ultimatum of Psalm 2: Serve Yahweh and His Messiah! A Remnant repented, but the majority broke the bonds of the covenant. In A.D. 66, Yahweh commenced to curse Jerusalem and its faithless rulers. The Jewish War of 66-70 was Israel's "baptism of fire" (Matthew 3:11ff.). It marked the first fulfillment of the book of Revelation, the umpteenth for Psalm 2. "Blessed" were the faithful in Israel, for they found refuge in the mountains as Jerusalem, at cost of over one million Jewish lives, found its destruction.

III. After A.D. 70: Western christianity.
A. Verses 1-3: Christian kings and rulers, that is, church leaders, attempt to displace the Messiah Jesus from His episcopacy of the christian community. They rob Him of His honour as all-sufficient Saviour, incarnate Son of God, and Keeper of the keys to death. They deny the Spiritual nature of His kingship. They truncate the expectation of God's promised Rule by declaring a Utopia here and now. If necessary, they will themselves establish it with force. Jesus is otherwise admired as a "good person", who deserves to be emulated.
B. Verses 4-6: This way of life spells opposition to God who has sent the Messiah to accomplish our redemption. God reacts in anger to him "who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant...and outraged the Spirit of grace" (Hebrews 10:29-31).
C. Verses 7-9: In contrast to the universal rebellion against God and His Messiah, the faithful may comfort themselves with God's decree whereby all power is given to the Messiah. The book of Revelation continually reinforces this comfort through repeated refer-
ences to Psalm 2. Revelation reaffirms the claim of Psalm 2 that the Messiah will come to judge the Babylon of apostate Christianity, which has for so long oppressed and persecuted the saints.

D. Verses 10-12: God is still merciful, because He does not wish "that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (II Peter 3:9). The Christian proclamation bears an ultimative character which finds its point of departure in the claim God makes in His covenant. The covenantal words "Now, therefore" (Psalm 2) is sounded throughout the New Testament, and colours man's response to the Messiah. All are warned that rejection of the ultimatum will lead to perdition. The vision which John saw concerning Jerusalem's fall was, in first instance, fulfilled in his own day; but the prophecy will continue to apply until it is finally consummated in a global sense upon Christ's return. Let this serve as a warning to those who have not yet "seen" or "heard". Let it also serve as a blessing to those who have found their refuge in God and His Messiah.

8. Introduction to the Writings completed.

This completes our treatment of Psalms 1 and 2, each of which functions as introduction to both the book of Psalms and the Writings.

What is so impressive about the third part of Scripture, the Writings, is the beautiful mosaic pattern it creates. The Writings include psalms, wisdom literature, love poetry, the history of Ruth, the story of Esther at the Persian court, lamentations
about the lives of Old Testament saints, reflections on the vanity, or transitory nature, of our daily tasks, apocalyptic literature, and the history from Adam to Artaxerxes. And all are intrinsically connected to each other, as well as to the previous and subsequent parts of the Bible, by several main themes which were introduced by Psalms 1 and 2. The different books of the Writings are all variations of two basic themes: 'Despite all else, Yahweh stands at the side of the righteous and causes their lives to bear fruit' (Psalms 1) and 'Despite all else, the Kingdom of Yahweh and His Messiah will achieve the final victory' (Psalms 2).

Now for a brief summary of the books of Writings.

a) Psalms.

It's the Songbook of the godfearing, though usually always poor, Remnant which remained true to Yahweh. And if this minority always seemed to be on the losing side, always seemed to be disadvantaged and exploited by their uncaring Israelite brethren, the psalmists consistently confessed to their faith that Yahweh stood on the side of His people and that, regardless of the opposition, Yahweh would come through for them as He had promised. "Yahweh knows the way of the righteous" was an unshakable assurance to the psalmists and those whom they sought to inspire. "I will tell of the decree of the Lord" was a certainty which saw them through the darkest hour.

b) Proverbs.

The polarity, or front, set out in Psalm 1 surfaces in nearly every Proverb. It's the polarity between the righteous and the wicked. There are numerous close-ups of the righteous who shun the way of the wicked and walk instead according to the precepts of God's Torah, on which they meditate day and night. Proverbs gives numerous illustrations
of the fruitful lives led by the righteous and, by contrast, of the futile lives lived by the wicked. The "blessing" of Psalm 1 reverberates through many a proverb. Proverbs shows how healing and reconciling the fear of the Lord can be and, also, how self-destructive the principles of the wicked can be.

Like the Psalms, the wisdom of Proverbs is based on the same covenantal foundation of Sinai. The wisdom of Proverbs translates the precious gems of God's Law into everyday language suitable for everyday situations within the faithful community of God's covenantal people.

c) Job.

The righteous often have more than their share of suffering. Sometimes this brings the reaction: "Why, God, oh why?" The dead orthodoxy of Job's friends does little to alleviate the problem. As counsellors, they failed to recognize that Job was righteous, and missed the point entirely. They looked at it this way: either Job is godfearing and righteous, in which case God wouldn't do this to him; or else God was punishing Job for his wickedness. In other words, either God or Job is guilty. Job knew this wasn't true: "Your maxims are proverbs of ashes", he objected (Job 13:12). God wasn't guilty, but then neither was Job! Job struggled to maintain this to himself, because he had nowhere else to go. "And yet," he felt, "God knows the way of the righteous!". His God was a loyal Sovereign who would remain true to His covenantal obligations, Job felt. God cannot make us understand His divine decrees; we are simply too small and too finite in understanding. The only course left open to Job was to have faith, despite experiencing an intense suffering which he could not understand. But it was his faith which
was counted to him for righteousness.

d) Song of Solomon.

The key also fits this oftimes highly allegorized book. The blessing of Psalm 1 need only be modified slightly in order to apply to the Song: "Blessed is he whose sexual life and marriage is not ruled by the counsel of the wicked, but who subjects himself completely to the instruction of the Torah".

The confrontation is between the instruction of Yahweh and the amorality or immorality of the age. In contrast to the prostitution cult of heathen Canaanites, in which many wayward covenant people also revelled, the Song calls young men and women to subject their love life to the kingship of the Lord. Life will bear God's blessed fruit only if it is founded on the covenant requirements and promises of Yahweh. Listen to the Instruction, says the Song, sing your covenantal songs of love and, rest assured, you will live happily ever after.

e) Ruth.

"Having delight in the law", is a blessing, not a sin, says Psalm 1. Boaz and Ruth knew this to be true. They gleaned grain together, following the instructions God had given them in His law (Leviticus 19:9 ff.). And, consistent with the spirit of the Torah, he accepted the rights of redemption for Naomi's land. Respecting the ancient law obligating him to accept the widow of a next of kin, he married Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth. Step by step, he patterned his life after the terms of the covenant. And what kinds of fruits did their lives bear? The end, though not yet in sight, was overwhelming.

The promise of the coming Messiah would be fulfilled through the house of Boaz and Ruth. Does it still seem "accidental" that Ruth entered Boaz's life one day? Even at this early date, God
was preparing the seed and the field and the harvest....

f) Lamentations.

The authors of Lamentations were very similar to the poet of Psalm 1, meditating on God's Law day and night. Small wonder that they were thrown into such deep despair and sorrow by the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. They were acquainted with the curse of the covenant (Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28). To them, the fall of Jerusalem were the wages of sin. But there was more to Leviticus 26 than simply the curse; Leviticus showed the way back to God through humility and repentance (Leviticus, ). Reconciliation through humility was the only possible response for a nation fallen from grace. But isn't that also how western christianity should respond today? The apocalyptic handwriting is there for all to see! But perhaps, though God forbid, the church will follow in the footsteps of ancient Israel and choose to ignore the signs. If that's the case, the faithful few will become fewer yet and be driven into the same kind of spiritual isolation in which Jeremiah and Lamenters found themselves (Jeremiah 40-44).

God's kingdom and His temple were totally and permanently obliterated, or so it seemed. The messiah-king had been removed into exile. Of course, it was not the end of the story, and they knew it. They knew that God was "at the side of the righteous". They confessed "But thou, O Lord, dost reign for ever; thy throne endures to all generations" (Lamentations 5:19), thereby echoing Psalm 2: "I will tell of the decree of Yahweh". Despite the paralysis resulting from the Babylonian exile, delivery was sure: "The Lord is my portion... therefore I will hope in him" (Lamentations 3:24).
g) Ecclesiastes.

The Preacher was another in a long line of faithful whose delight was in the Law of the Lord. It was also the source of his wisdom. The Preacher was troubled by the transitoriness, the emptiness of man's slaving. Still, he did not succumb to Sartre's kind of nihilism. The Preacher knew Yahweh to be the Creator of a good world, but that man had brought God's curse upon himself: "Behold, this alon I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices" (Ecclesiastes 7:29). He had learned from Genesis 3 why man's life was cursed with inevitable death and why he must slave on the earth which was cursed because of man's sin. But the Preacher's scope went beyond life on this earth; he knew that the day of judgment was coming (Ecclesiastes 8:8, 11:9, 12:14). To the righteous Israelite, this judgment meant liberation, following the tenor of Psalm 1: "The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish". Beware, says the Preacher, of self-destructive pessimism, but also of other-worldly idealism. The Torah's facts of life are these: accept the brokenness of this life without resigning yourself to it, and enjoy the few days of this life, for it is a gift of God (Ecclesiastes 5:17ff.).

h) Esther.

"The kings of the earth --or land-- set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against Yahweh and his anointed...." (Psalm 2:2). Such was the fundamental pattern in the days of Esther, when Haman planned the extinction of God's people. Only: "The Lord has them in derision".

The book of Esther is closely connected with the Psalms, but also with Moses and the prophets. Haman was an Amalekite, and Esther and Mordecai knew from the Torah that "the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exodus
Shortly after Israel's exodus from Egypt, Amalek had planned to annihilate Israel. As a result, God had declared Amalek archenemy of His people (Exodus 17:14). God would not permit Israel to forget Amalek's attempts at Rephidim: "Remember what Amalek did to you as you came out of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 25:17ff.).

From the Prophets, Esther and Mordecai had undoubtedly learned of Saul's refusal to execute Yahweh's doom over Amalek, even though Samuel had reminded Saul of the events at Rephidim (I Samuel 15). Saul had mulishly refused to fight "Yahweh's war", but Esther and Mordecai, it can be said, lived by the spirit of the Torah and Prophets.

Esther is another reminder of the motifs of Psalms 1 and 2.

i) Daniel.

Daniel might easily have been the model of the righteous man portrayed by the psalmists. "Meditating on God's law" was something Daniel faithfully observed. He refused to defile his conscience by eating unclean, Babylonian diets. Daniel was one of the few who knew the cause for the captivity, the curse of the Horeb covenant, and, as such, could act as the intercessor on behalf of his people: "As it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us...." (Daniel 9:13).

The calamity was great indeed. The royal house of David, which God had graced with His blessings, had been ignominiously deported to far-flung lands. The temple had been razed. Daniel himself served a king who had reduced Jerusalem to rubble and, seemingly, had terminated the high hopes for a messianic future. Whatever the future held, it seemed that Israel would not share in it. Yet despite this apparent doom, Daniel came to proclaim anew the unavoidable ultimate victory of the kingdom of God: "...the God of heaven will set up a kingdom
which shall never be destroyed..." (Daniel 2:44). Nebuchadnezzar and Darius even realized that. Said Nebuchadnezzar: "I blessed the Most High...for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation" (Daniel 4:34). Darius even issued a decree to..."the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring for ever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end" (Daniel 6:27). As for Daniel himself, his revelatory proclamation resurrected hopes among the exiles in the coming kingship of Yahweh and his messiah.

The sign and seal of Psalms 1 and 2 are also clearly visible in the writings of Daniel. Daniel is the personification of the righteous who stand in the world but who do not share its principles. He saw in a vision Yahweh, "the Ancient of Days", sitting on the throne, and giving dominion and glory and kingdom to one "who came like a son" (Daniel 7:13ff.). What is this but a continuation of Psalm 2:8? In reality, the whole book of Daniel is an endorsement of the blessing concluding Psalm 2: "Blessed are all who take refuge in him!"

j) Ezra-Nehemiah-Chronicles.

Perhaps no other book is as clear about the double covenantal thrust of blessing and curse, and about Israel's related responses of faithfulness and apostasy as these three books. (cf. § 1).39 They are commentaries on Israel's history as seen from the Torah perspective. If Israel should not return to the Law, it was doomed.

It's been suggested that Ezra and Nehemiah were really forerunners of the Scribes and Pharisees with their sterile legalism. However, the very placement of these books suggest the opposite. They are based on the Torah, echo the voice of the Torah and interpret Israel's history in the light of the Torah. The three books are connected to all
the other Writings with the common denominator, Israel's life in the Torah.

Also, they are united with the rest of the Writings by their internal purpose, which was to write a history of Yahweh's kingdom under the stewardship of His subkings, the royal house of David. It must have caused the author a good deal of pain at times, and yet, he had not given up the ship. The "decree of Yahweh" regarding His messiah-king, a decree with which Psalm 2 joined the books of the Prophets to those of the Writings, was the vortex around which the whole of Israel's history rotated. Yahweh had said to His subking: "You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession" (Psalm 2:7,8; cf. I Chronicles 17). And the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles interpreted the abominable events which befell the house of David on the basis of the faith proclaimed by Psalm 2: Irrespective of what happens now, Yahweh will fulfill His promises to David to establish world dominion. They clearly anticipate the coming of David's great Son and His Messianic kingdom. That's why I earlier called these books "The Advent Trilogy".

k) Scripture cannot be broken, John 10:35.

The Holy Spirit commands our profoundest respect for assimilating such variegated material into one coherent whole, the Holy Scripture.

The material is a mosaic, but a beautiful mosaic with a clearly visible design. The pattern does not detract from the colour, nor should the colour blind us to the message. There's not a "system", as someone might object, but unity in diversity, an integrality of purpose. "Scripture", as the young might say, "has it together".

But the mosaic goes on, into the New Testament, beginning again with David and his Son..., and with the blessed assurance: "the KINGDOM of heaven is at hand!"
It's Sunday morning.

The minister has chosen to speak on Psalm 15. The sermon is "revealing". He reminds the congregation of its depravity before God. "Which of us", he thunders, "can live up to the demands of this psalm? Not just now and again, but always and perfectly?" Without waiting for an answer, because he thinks he knows the answer anyway, he concludes: "Nobody!".

There it is. Faces are anxious and drawn. A note of doom hangs over the faithful.

Who would have the gall to contradict this?

The speaker continues: "There is One who has fulfilled the requirements of Psalm 15, and that's our Saviour Jesus Christ. And if we believe in Him, God will forgive us our inability to do any good and accept us in grace.

Amen!"

1. The law is not a gun forcing us to Jesus.

We shouldn't criticise the preacher too much for his exposition of Psalm 15. After all, he learned it from his commentaries. And his commentaries clearly stated that the blessings of the Old Covenant were definitely less than those of the New Covenant, simply because the psalm makes no mention of faith and grace. And his commentaries also told him that grace in the Old Covenant was generally hidden under external legalism, such as is supposedly found in Psalm 15. According to the commentaries, the psalm lacks the gospel message that man cannot be obedient and that he therefore needs God's grace to come to full communion with God.
Sermons such as the one we heard are therefore not surprising. The minister could have made his caricature of Psalm 15 even more frightening. He could have said: "The psalm calls for the Christ! It drives us to the foot of the cross!", and similar edifying applications.

But is this what David intended? The Old Testament readers of Psalm 15 did not know the Lord Jesus Christ or His crucifixion. Was it David's plan to throw his readers into despair by confronting them with the bankruptcy of their lives? Is it true that he did not know faith and grace, as many commentaries presently maintain? And if it is not true, what accounts for these interpretations?

Ever since Apostolic days, the philosophies of Judaism and Gnosticism have created havoc with simple Bible knowledge and scientific exegesis. Their impact has remained with the church for almost twenty centuries.

The spectacles of Judaism.

Let's go back to Sinai. At Sinai, God drew the children of Abraham into His presence. He made a Covenant with them, which was, in every sense of the word, a covenant of grace. This covenant at Sinai was, in fact, the second covenant of grace, following upon the one which He had made with Abraham and his descendants! The Torah or Law contain the documents of these covenants. But how did the Judaistic Pharisees interpret the Torah? They reduced it to something like a labour contract, with nothing but a series of demands, in return for which God would make certain concessions! "In return for our religious practises", they reasoned, "God would give us salvation". Having thus caricaturized the Law, there was no longer any room for God's grace. The Law, which was Gospel
Good News to the Israelite was distorted into a labour contract of requirements and rewards. According to the Judaists, the children of God were serfs or labourers whose present lives and promises of the hereafter were governed by the terms of a religious labour contract, the Law of God. This idea of the Law as labour agreement is deeply rooted in Judaistic tradition.

Unfortunately, the ideas of Judaism grew like malignant cancers through the body of the Christian church also. Furthermore, the legalism of the Pharisees has now been carried forward to the whole of Scripture, the New Testament included. Despite Paul's almost desperate efforts to save the early church from legalism, many Christians have come to interpret the gospel of our Lord Jesus as a sterile book of rules. The misery which resulted is almost indescribable (cf. Genesis-Exodus, and Leviticus).

Once the word "Law" is identified with a contract or an agreement, there will be no end to the sorrows. Once a person has fallen into that trap, he will never rest until he has assured himself that he has "kept the law". This was the case with Thomas à Kempis, Tauler and Eckhart, who wrote tomes on "how to" fulfill the law in order to come to the true faith. Only it failed to work for Martin Luther; he felt that he "could never make it". The Reformation did not end the matter. Legalism once again reared its ugly head. Even the purists of the Reformation had little good to say about the Law. Those who did meet considerable opposition within their own circle (Genesis-Exodus). In the eyes of most, the Law became a gun held to the head of the believer to force him to Christ. But this is hardly what Paul meant when he described the Law as a "tutor" unto Christ (R.S.V. has "custodian"
in the sense of "foster-parent"; cf. also Genesis-
Exodus, and Leviticus.

This is probably how Psalm 15 was read in later
synagogues. The Law is an iron-clad contract and
woe the wretched believers! And this kind of legal-
ism distorts the other Bible books as well. The Law
is the foundation, and if you dynamite the founda-
tion, you cannot expect the building to remain
standing (Leviticus).

If we read the Law through
the spectacles of Judaism, as a labour contract,
then Psalm 15 can only arouse in us a feeling of
wretched impotence which compels us to seek another
escape, namely, in Christ. The question of Psalm
15, "O Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tent?" must
have been a chilling one to those who interpreted the
Law legalistically. It was equally chilling and gloomy
when our minister asked the question, "Which of us
can live up to the demands of this psalm?". The
uncertainty remains. In the eighteenth century,
during the Age of Enlightenment, when people
turned away from the covenant by the thousands,
there were those who began passing out tracts
containing the rules of "how to live", in order
that one may be certain of salvation. But, despite
efforts to stick close to the rules, doubt remained.
That's what happens when Psalm 15 is read legalistically.

Those who still read Psalm 15 --and there are
many who bother less and less with the Old Testament--, see the Law only as a stark reminder of their doom
and desolation, the only escape from which would
be to flee to Jesus.

***

Someone may at this point object that Leviticus
itself dictates the terms: "...keep my statutes...
by doing which a man shall live" (18:5). That's
true, of course, only this shouldn't be interpreted
legalistically either. It's very easy to slip into
Judaistic thinking and see the Law only as a collection of ordinances without grace. The statutes and ordinances to which Moses referred, however, included those of reconciliation, washing away, forgiveness of sin and renewal of life. "The priest shall atone for the sin which he has done, and it shall be forgiven him". Leviticus 1 through 7 is full of such offerings of atonement, of grace, in other words. These regulations were part and parcel of the total Law of which Moses said "keep my statutes...by doing which a man shall live". Who has the right to remove from the total scope of the Law such reconciliatory and merciful precepts as the Day of Atonement, the Guilt Offering, Sin Offering and Peace Offering? The Law ceases to be a legalistic document if we read Moses's words as follows: "The man who observes all the statutes, including those concerning the removal of guilt, the forgiveness of sin and the assurance of atonement, who faithfully lives on the promises and sacraments of the Torah, shall live!" The way of salvation has never been any other than that pointed out by Moses in Leviticus 18:5!

The spectacles of Gnosticism.

Since New Testament times, Gnosticism has made deep inroads into the christian church. Actually, Gnosticism and Judaism make rather suitable bed-fellows. There is practically nothing Gnosticism likes better than "contradictions" (cf. I Timothy 6:20). They thrived on making distinctions and contradictions, thereby sowing disunity within the early church. Paul has called them "deceitful spirits" with "demonic doctrines" (ITimoth 4:1). Their most damaging contradiction was that between the "external, harsh and loveless" Old Testament and the "internal, more loving and lofty" New.
If read Gnostically, Psalm 15 is "externally legalistic" and lacks "the gospel message that man cannot be obedient..." If Gnostic contradictions are read back into the psalm, it becomes meaningless, of course.

The Gnostic "knowledge of contradictions" (I Timothy 6:20) does not square with the true nature of the Law of Moses or with the psalmists' echo of that Law. The Law of Moses is Gospel, and its Gospel meaning is expressed repeatedly by the psalmists. The covenants God made with Abraham and Israel are proofs of His merciful grace. The book of Psalms is a testimony of that merciful grace. There is no ordinance in the Torah which does not reveal God's love for His people. There is no statute which operates outside the scope of His promises to His people. And whereas the psalms are all based on the Torah, I can safely say that to misunderstand the Torah is to lose the impact of the psalms!

A covenant psalm.

Let's agree, first of all, that the Law was Israel's Good News, its Gospel, and not a long list of punitive prohibitions designed to strike terror into the hearts of Israelites. Let's also agree that this Old Testament Gospel was God's merciful offer to freely give justification, sanctification and glorification to the man who righteously sought to live on the basis of the covenant. All at once, we leave the "problems" resulting from Judaistic and Gnostic distinctions and contradictions behind! Scripture becomes a continuity! The Law of Moses, Psalm 15, the commands of our Lord and the words of the apostles are all in one line! The psalmist, and his fellow believers, with him, were as we are: members of the covenant. They were not, as many would
have us believe, at one end of the "bargaining table" working on an agreement with God which they knew they could not keep. The Law was a formalization of what had already existed, namely, the covenant relationship between God and His people. The Israelite could not withdraw from the covenant, no, not even if he failed to keep the ordinances. The curse of the covenant would then rest upon him, to be sure, but he existed within a covenantal relationship. He was not "free" or "uncommitted"; he could not "take it or leave it". God had accepted him in His grace and his continuation in the covenant did not depend on his fulfillment of impossible demands. On the basis of the Torah, the psalmist, a member of God's covenant addressed his fellow covenant members about their mutual covenant partner, their Yahweh. Psalm 15 is truly a psalm of the covenant.

2. He who does these things shall never be moved.

Was Psalm 15 perhaps a convocation canticle? Was it especially written for the convocation at the holy of the Lord's temple? Some believe that when pilgrims assembled before the temple, they would sing verse 1: "O Lord, who shall sojourn in they tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?" To which the priests would respond with a choral version of verses 2 through 5.

Scripture does not mention such a ritual. Psalm 15 may well have had such use, but almost any of the psalms could have been used for this. It should not mean that the psalm could not have been used for numerous other occasions as well. It could have been --and still can be-- sung at home while doing the dishes or harvesting the crop. It could have been read in the home or recited in prayer.

It's not possible to prove that Psalm 15 was composed exclusively for pilgrims assembling at the
temple court. It could have been intended as wisdom poetry, taught in home or school, or as memory verse. In fact, it uses the same didactic method --including the ten commandments-- which is used elsewhere (Psalm 34:12-15 --by David; Proverbs 31:2-9, 30:4; Ecclesiastes 1:3, 6:12). Finally, the question of verse 1 is not addressed to the priests, but to Yahweh, who has already given His answer in the Torah. The answers given are all consonant with the Law of Moses. ***

Some have thought it significant that Psalm 15 makes no worship --i.e. cultic-- demands, as regards to purity, for example. However, the psalm is an echo of the Torah, and the Torah, as we have seen, is not exclusively a book for worship, but covers all areas and contingencies of Israelite life. The Israelite did not distinguish sharply between life on the sabbath and life during the rest of the week (Leviticus; Numbers-Deuteronomy). The demands concerning levitical purity and such were pedagogic-symbolic reminders to Israel to dedicate one's entire life to the Law of God.

An impure or unholy daily life would have made even the strictest of worship services impure and worthless (Psalm 40:7ff., 50, 51:18ff.; Isaiah 1:10-20; Jeremiah 7:1-15; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21; Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 23). As Samuel's pupil, David knew that very well; "obedience is better than sacrifices", (Samuel 15:22).

Now, on to the psalm itself.

Verse 1:

O Yahweh, who shall sojourn in thy tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill? How is it possible that people still suggest that faith and grace were unknown to the psalmist?
The name "Yahweh" (YHWH) itself was the repository of all the redemptive works God had accomplished, out of grace, for His people. The name "Yahweh" formed a recapitulation of the redemptive events from Abraham through Egypt and into Sinai. (cf. Genesis-Exodus, ). Without this redemptive history, the foundation of the Israelite-christian world, Psalm 15 would never have been written. It was grace which saved Abraham. It was grace which saved Israel from Egypt. It was grace which brought down the Law on Sinai.

The psalmist also mentions Yahweh's "tent" and His "holy hill". That does not necessarily refer to mount Zion. Moses used this parallel construction of "sanctuary" and "mountain" back at the Red Sea (Exodus 15:17; cf. Numbers-Deuteronomy, footnote ).

God's grace for His people consisted of the fact that He chose to dwell among them. He honoured His people with His presence, in a place where His priests blessed and taught and in which everything, including colours, sacrifices, clothing and materials, attested to His love for the life of His people. How can it be said that a psalm which sings of God's Home among His people does not contain any grace?

***

Who, qualify to be His guests? Eastern hospitality was somewhat different from what we practise. A host felt much more obliged towards his guests than we do today. We know that from Lot, who was prepared to protect his guests even at the cost of his daughters (Genesis 19:8). A guest could rely on his host's protection for many kilometers on the road.

Paraphrasing Psalm 1: "To whom does the Lord give His protection and security?***
To try to answer this legalistically is impossible. The minister at the beginning of the chapter would have sighed, "No one". However, if we read the book of Psalms as Songs of the Covenant, and the entire Scripture as the Book of the Covenant, the answer is simple. We can then safely dismiss the nagging doubts and the constant despair. The verses 2 through 5 are a brief summary of the Law which is elsewhere summed up with "keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments" (Psalm 103:18). The psalms reminds Israelites, who already lived in covenantal communion with Yahweh, what they must do to remain loyal covenant partners of Yahweh (cf. Isaiah 33: 14-16).

Verse 1 could be read as follows: "Yahweh, what have You promised Your people?". David thereupon proceeded to confess that he believed what God had promised. What had God promised in the Torah? That the man "who does these things shall live" (Leviticus 18:5). Psalm 15 is a confession of faith in the promise found in Leviticus. David concluded his psalm with the confession: "He who does these things shall never be moved".

Verse 2:

He, who walks blamelessly and does what is right, and speaks truth from his heart;

When Yahweh reminded Abraham what was expected of him as loyal covenant partner, He used virtually the same words: "Walk before me, and be blameless". Instead of "blameless", we could say: "with undivided heart". Yahweh wanted to be served by resolute, unequivocating people, not by people with all kinds of ulterior motives, men of "double mind" (James 1:8, 4:8). Yahweh demands integrity. He will not deal with those who wander off "the way". His people may stumble, but that's something else than venturing
away from covenantal ways (Genesis, ). Psalm 19 focusses beautifully on the meaning of the words "blameless": "Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression" (Psalm 19:14). "Walking blameless" is, in fact, a characteristic of the righteous.

The legalists within the christian church who elevate ethical behaviour to the status of super-norm have great difficulty with this interpretation. How, they ask, can we be blameless, with undivided heart? Are all our works not imperfect and polluted by sin? Aren't we all miserable sinners? I've discussed that in chapter 4 and we'll return to it in Psalm 26. We'll also deal with the word "blameless". For the time being, however, the following will have to suffice.

The ethicists mentioned above lump all people together under the heading "sinners all". The only distinction which they will allow for is that between believing sinners and unbelieving sinners. This effectively erases the division which Scripture makes between the righteous and the wicked. And, as I've said earlier, it's becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain that distinction. Why?

If we consider ourselves "righteous", we are all too often looked upon as "Pharisees" who consider themselves better than everybody else. And not by the "world" only; many christians hesitate to use Scripture's terminology when it comes to both the righteous and the wicked.

But is it really possible to walk "blamelessly"? Well, Scripture says it is, and do we need further recommendation? (Psalm 7:9, 18:24-33, 19:8, 25:21, 26:1, 37:18, 41:13, 84:12, 101:2,6, 119:1, 80; Proverbs 2:7, 21, 10:9, 29, 11:20, 19:1, 28:10).
Some were named by names: "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (Genesis 6:9). Job was also "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). David gave a beautiful description of what it was like to be blameless: "For all his ordinances were before me, and from his statutes I did not turn aside. I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from guilt" (II Samuel 22:23ff.; cf. Psalm 18). David even dared appeal to his being blameless, as we shall see in Psalm 26. And of Zechariah and Elizabeth we read: "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1:6).

They were "blameless" because they walked with an undivided heart, not because they were perfect. After all, Scripture has recorded a number of questionable things about them; this, however, did not detract from their blamelessness. If the direction of one's life is righteous, he is blameless. And to be righteous is to walk in the light of the covenant. What's the point, then, of dwelling on "remaining weakness and sin" and such life? How can that alter the fact that one is blameless and righteous before God? What, indeed, is more important than to be righteous before God? Are we called upon to "add" further conditions, in the form of moral codes, etc., to our walk with God?

The fundamental requirement God makes of the righteous, a requirement which He made known as long ago as Abraham, is simply: "Walk before God's face blameless". We don't need the red herrings of moralists and legalistic Judaists.

Such are the righteous who will dwell with God through eternity!

***
To avoid misunderstanding, I should point out that God's children do not live in communion with him on the basis of their blameless walk. The sole basis of Israel's salvation was God's grace. Similarly, the sole basis of our salvation is God's grace realized through the sacrificial offering of Jesus. Christ's work is our ground, and there is no other. We are saved through God's grace and Jesus' righteousness and holiness, granted through the promise of the Gospel and accepted by us through faith. Such faith must, of course, bear fruit, otherwise it is dead (James 2). The fruit is what verses 3 through 5 are all about.

Righteousness and truth.

The word "righteousness", which finds frequent use in Scripture, has all but become a stranger to our vocabulary. And when we use it, it usually has Graeco-Roman overtones. In legal vocabulary of Antiquity, righteousness was strictly a legal concept and justice was devoid of any human compassion or mercy. In Scripture, however, as we've seen before, justice and righteousness are "caught up" in God's love. There is no such thing as God's "cold and sterile" precepts, according to which a man may be guilty or innocent. ($ 3,1). Righteousness is remaining loyal to God's covenant in all of life. Righteousness is synonymous with obedience to God's covenantal laws and believing in His promises.

***

Whoever is righteous, not just once, but as a matter of life perspective, is Yahweh's covenant partner whom Yahweh will not shame or abandon. A righteous man is a man of truth. Truth in this sense is more than the "brute facts" as we have seen earlier. Facts, while appearing to be true, in a sense, can nevertheless be misleading. Facts may appear to be correct, but unless they serve the truth, they are false.
can nevertheless be misleading. Facts may appear to be correct, but unless they serve the truth, they are false. We saw that in the case of Doeg, who betrayed David to Saul; and in the case of Ben-hadad who thought he had gotten the better of Elijah. In neither case did the "facts" serve the redemptive plan of God, and were therefore false. Truth is equivalent to solidity; truth is durable, it cannot be moved. I've earlier compared truth to granite or any solid foundation, and a lie to quicksand or thin ice. Truth is what Yahweh demands of his covenant partners. He requires that they remain true to their word, reliable to a fault.

Verse 3:

Who does not slander with his tongue,
and does no evil to his friend,
nor takes up a reproach against this neighbour.

Verse 3 is also about the direction of our life. "For we all make mistakes", wrote James, "and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also" (3:2). But James also warned against the viciousness and evil of the tongue (3:5-8). Those in the communion of the righteous are advised to temper the excesses of this small but powerful part of our body. Those of God's household should not slander others of God's household. Slander often brings the burden of grief upon the victim. David had experienced plenty of such burdens in his life. There were slanderers in the company of Saul (I Samuel 23:19ff.; 24:10; 26:1ff.; 19). His own son, Absalom, triggered a rebellion with his tongue (II Samuel 15:1-6). David feared the slanderous tongue of Achitofel (II Samuel 15:31). He had to endure the scorn and slander of the worthless Shimei. Even in his old age, he could not escape the evil abuse heaped upon him by his detractors (I Kings 1).
David's suffering was repeated and fulfilled in the lives of many righteous after him, not the least of which was our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember the sinister lies and scorn to which He was subjected by His own covenant brothers.

These examples also show that slander is not limited to "those out there". Slander, lies, defamation of character, whisper campaigns and character assassination occur within the context of God's covenantal community. This may not continue, of course; we cannot expect to remain members of the same household if we continue to make ourselves guilty of something as heinous as that! True members of the same household shun the practises of Saul and his unscrupulous clique, of the false witnesses against Naboth, of the brothers of Anathot who slandered their townsman Jeremiah and the sanctimonious church leaders who sought to assassinate the characters of the apostles and their following.

I've already observed elsewhere that the invention of the printing press and radio-and television-communication has greatly assisted the dissemination of the Lie. The printed page and the radio wave are simply instruments of the tongue and have multiplied its efficiency. We could, perhaps, amend verse 3 to read: "who does not libel with the pen or spread slander through the media".

Verse 4a:

In whose eyes a reprobate is despised,
but who honours those who fear Yahweh.

Once again, here is the front so clearly delineated by Psalms 1 and 2, the demarcation line between the wealthy wicked and their pious veneer and the oppressed righteous in the Israelite church. Is it your wish to remain a member of God's household? Psalm 15:4 will force you to make a choice.
Psalm 15 tells us not to defend or rationalize the actions of the godless wicked, or reprobates as they are called here, but to honour the righteous, "who fear the Lord", even though we will not find many among them who are "wise according to worldly standards, not many powerful, not many of noble birth" (I Corinthians 26; cf. § 3,3). If God rejects the reprobate, others of His household will have to do the same.

Reprobates.

Has God rejected the wicked "from eternity"?

The Bible is very clear about that: "Behold, God will not reject a blameless man" (Job 8:20). "With the loyal thou dost show thyself loyal; with the blameless man thou dost show thyself blameless; with the pure thou dost show thyself pure; and with the crooked thou dost show thyself perverse" (Psalm 18:26ff.). The conclusion must be that God is not arbitrary. "Towards the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favour" (Proverbs 3:34. cf. re-scoffers § 4,5). In each case, there is a very good reason why God rejects certain men. It's as simple as closing one's eyes and rolling the dice. In first instance, it's man who rejects God and His covenant ways. Regarding foolish men who do not seek God or pretend He does not exist and who oppress His covenant people, Psalm 53 writes: "for God has rejected them" (verse 5). Of course, there were many, in those days, as witnessed by the psalmist: "God looks down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any that are wise, that seek after God. They have all fallen away; they are all alike depraved; there is none that does good, no, not one" (Psalm 53:1ff.). It's because they did not seek after God that God rejected them. There were times when it seemed that
all had turned away from God, save a Remnant
which carried on the identity of the nation of
Israel (II Kings 17:20; Jeremiah 31:37ff.). One reprobate named by name was Saul,
but there, also, Yahweh's motivation was clear:
"Because you have rejected the word of Yahweh,
he has also rejected you from being king" (I Samuel 15:26).

***

Who, according to verse 4, may remain members
of God's household? Only those who separate them-
selves from those who have rejected Yahweh. Verse
4 has also been translated as follows: "The despicable
man is rejected from his presence, but those who
fear Yahweh he feasts".18

That was also the motto of God's loyal covenant
partners. Samuel loved Saul, but God commanded him
to treat Saul as a reprobate in public (I Samuel
15:26; 16:1). The same attitude prevailed against
Jeroboam (II Chronicles 11:13ff.). Many faithful
left their possessions in Israel to move to Judah
where they could worship Yahweh properly (II
Chronicles 11:13ff.; cf. 15:9). When king Jehoshaphat
did not avoid his "reprobate" brother-in-law Ahab,
the prophet Jehu reprimanded him
"Should you help the wicked and love those who
hate the Lord?" (II Chronicles 19:2; cf. 20:35-37,
25:7). The townspeople of Jeremiah were also
reprobate, (Jeremiah 11), and Yahweh told Jeremiah
to avoid them and wait until they turned to him
(Jeremiah 15:19).

Some have called this attitude typically Old
Testamental 20. But what was Jesus' reaction when
the masses in His day turned against Him? He spoke
to them in parables, knowing they would not "see
with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand
with their hearts" and turn to Him for healing
(Matthew 13:15). Christ also recognized the division.
His apostles followed His example: "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (Acts 2:40). The division between Jesus' disciples and His enemies ran right through the nation of Israel. In fact, had He not forecast that He had come to bring division in the Jewish church? (Matthew 10:34ff.; cf. 10:11-14). Members of God's household must observe the following rule when it comes to reprobates: "Do I not turn away from them that have turned against thee, Yahweh?" (Psalm 139:21; Most translations have "hate" in both instances; this is somewhat unfortunate, because it can give the wrong impression. Our meaning of "hate" is loaded psychologically. It usually includes a deep and abiding passion against someone. The meaning of the Hebrew sane is different, however. It is less a negative psychological passion that a decision of the heart. It can mean "avoiding" or "ignoring" someone as a deliberate decision of the heart. The interpretation is particularly crucial in regards to Malachi 1:3, which, by way of Romans 9, has often been used to support arguments for the doctrine of reprobation.

Psalm 15 requires us to honour fellow members of the household, even if they are among the poor and uneducated of this world. Moses rejected the honours of the Egyptian court to become shepherd over a nomadic people, because "he considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt" (Hebrews 11:24ff.). Obadiah, chief steward to king Ahab, "revered the Lord greatly" (I Kings 18:3), and resigned from his prestigious position in order to look after the welfare of God's people: "he took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave, and fed them with bread and water", when queen Jezebel conspired to have them killed (I Kings 18:4). Isaiah was
chief chronicler in the service of king Uzziah, and probably highly respected for his erudition and breeding. Nevertheless, he abandoned his position to take up the cause of the faithful Remnant (II Chronicles 26:22). The greatest example was Jesus Himself. "He is the heir of all things..., reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power" (Hebrews 1) and yet has deemed to call us His brothers. He fulfilled what Psalm 15 required: "honour those who fear Yahweh". He requires this life-commitment from all of us.

Verses 4b and 5:

Who swears to his own hurt and does not change; who does not put out his money at interest, and does not take a bribe against the innocent. Money is a very telling criterion when it comes to acting righteously or telling the truth. Ancient economies also had extortionist interest rates on loans. Interest rates of 33% to 50% were not uncommon. This was fairly common practise, not just in Israel, but in Babylonia and Assyria as well. In those days, money was not borrowed primarily to finance new ventures, but to alleviate existing poverty. It doesn't take much imagination to see that those who were forced to borrow out of sheer necessity would never recover from the crushing blow of such usurious interest rates. One thing led to another, until finally the debtor, unable to make restitution, was forced into bankruptcy. The creditor would foreclose on him and seize, not only his fixed assets, but his children as well.

God had not rescued his people from Egyptian slavery only to see them succumb to domestic slavery. The laws recorded in Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:35-38 and Deuteronomy 23:19ff. were intended to avoid just such excesses. But what happened? We've seen earlier what happened in times Israel deserted
avoid such excesses. But what happened? We've seen earlier what happened in times Israel deserted the Torah (Leviticus; Numbers-Deuteronomy). The laws were clear: Israelites were not to become creditors, let alone "loansharks" such as were common in other nations (Leviticus).

The laws also forbade bribery (cf. Exodus 23:8; Deuteronomy 16:19, 27:25), "for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous" (Deuteronomy 16:19). "Surely oppression makes the wise man foolish, and a bribe corrupts the mind" (Ecclesiastes 7:7; Numbers-Deuteronomy). Members of God's household ought to be able to say in good conscience: "...from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it?" (I Samuel 12:3). Whoever fulfills God's precepts faithfully "shall never be moved".

The blameless shall never be moved.

I have deliberately mentioned some who were known to have walked blamelessly to show that, despite claims by some that no man can walk blamelessly before God, it is possible. It is not only possible, it is imperative.

Whoever has chosen for Yahweh can live securely on the basis of His covenant promises, far away from the decay and death of a way of life which has deliberately shut Him out.

***

The Old Testament believer also knew that his future had been made secure by Yahweh, through death. They also believed the resurrection of the dead and eternal life (Daniel 12:13). Martha—believed it also, and while it may be argued that she stood on the "threshold of the new dispensation",
dead and eternal life (Daniel 12:13). Martha believed it also, and while it may be argued that she "stood on the threshold of the new dispensation", this was not the case with Abraham, whose faith and expectations carried him beyond the promised land (John 11:24; Hebrews 11:17ff., 11:10-16; cf. II Kings 5:7). All looked for the life to come.

***

Psalm 15 is reminiscent of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in that both outline specific commands. Both are promises of our King for us, as members of the household of God and co-heirs of the Kingdom: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them" shall enter and be secure (Matthew 5,6,7). However, those who do not build upon Him will fall away, and their fall will be great. The conclusion of the Sermon and Psalm 15 are consistent. When Christ the King returns in His glory, He will judge each according to the life he has chosen, whether it be good or bad.

(The last few paragraphs went poorly, partly because there seems to be little continuity and coherence in van Deursen)
"A Miktam of David".

Luther and some other early translators rendered 'miktam' "jewel", more on the basis of the thrust of the psalm than on the actual meaning of the word. We don't know what miktam means, but one thing is certain: Psalm 16 is indeed a jewel. The psalm is full of joy in Yahweh and trust in His promises. Living about a full millenium before Christ, the psalmist confessed virtually the same thing as Paul did later when he wrote, "For I am sure that neither death, nor life...will be able to separate us from the love of God...." (Romans 8:38ff.).

It's little wonder that the apostles often preached about Psalm 16 after Jesus' ascension. The Holy Spirit revealed to them that Psalm 16 was also about the second David (Acts 2 and 13). Because of this, I see no reason to doubt that David was the author of the psalm.

1. David in the shockwaves of the Judges.

When David committed his confession to writing, the age of the Judges had hardly come to an end. He was born in the transition period between the judges in Israel and the kingdom. Both Saul and David were anointed by the last judge, Samuel. But times were changing. The prophetic words of Hannah, that righteous intercessor in Israel, were beginning to be fulfilled. Her faithful teachings to her son, Samuel, were the means through which Yahweh brought redemption and restoration out of the dark. And even though Saul had repeatedly frustrated Samuel's reformational work in Israel, David faithfully continued the work of his tutor. His most cherished ambition was to build a house for his God (II Samuel 7).
When God reserved that honour for David's successor, however, he still returned the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (II Samuel 6). David bought the land for the temple (II Samuel 24:24). He prepared the worship service for the new temple, including temple music and, last but not least, a large part of his psalm-collection (cf. I Chronicles 16:37-43). It's safe to say that the restorative work accomplished by Yahweh through Samuel and David were His reply to Hannah's prayer.

Of course, when David died, things were not ideal in the life of the Israelite church. The reformation had been only partial and sporadic. Not even David had been able to escape periodic lapses of faith.

David's weaknesses.

Whether the household of David and his wife Michal included idols, or teraphim, is not known. (I Samuel 19; cf. I and II Samuel).

It's doubtful, however, that all the excessive practices of the age of judges could have been eliminated in one fell swoop; even by a man as reformationally minded as David.

Prior to his coronation in Judah, David was still befriended to Achis, king of the Philistines, and probably had connections with many Philistine notables.

David seems to have been unaware of many of the Torah's requirements, such as the one which forbade the marriage of his daughter Tamar to her half-brother (Leviticus 18:9; II Samuel 13:13). Despite all his zeal for the purity of the tabernacle service, he apparently did not know that the ark was supposed to have been carried by Levites, not transported on a cart (Number 7:9; II Samuel 6:3). The Torah also forbade that ark and tabernacle should
be separated. David placed the ark in a special tent in Jerusalem, which in itself was an improvement, but the arkless tabernacle remained at Gibeon (I Chronicles 15:1; II Chronicles 1:2-5, 5).

Gibeon, of course, was not even an Israelite city; Gibeonites were "of the remnant of the Amorites", in other words, heathens! (II Samuel 21:2). Even after David had died, people continued to sacrifice on the high places, as was their custom (I Kings 3:2 7). Finally, David failed to clear the land of Canaanite peoples. Instead, there are numerous examples of assimilation and even intermarriage (II Samuel 8:18 and 23:37-39).

I should also point out that this demonstrates Yahweh's great patience; He takes into account the difficult circumstances in which we often find ourselves. Any reformation and return will always be partial and faulty.

When?

What is the date of Psalm 16? Some have suggested David composed it while he was king in Hebron 9. Hebron constituted a breathing-spell after his constant persecution by Saul. At the same time, he had reason to pray: "Preserve me, O God, for in thee I take refuge", because Hebron was precariously located between the powerful Philistines on one side, and Ishbosheth and his veteran general Abner on the other. These arguments, however, are not necessarily conclusive and the psalm need not date from the seven years he spent at Hebron. David was not the type to wait until conditions were ideal before he could confess "the lines have fallen for me in pleasant places". And, as far as Saul's son and the Philistines were concerned, David was well acquainted with ticklish situations.
While we cannot determine the date of the psalm, it is very likely that it originated during the period immediately following the judges. The reform movements had not yet been carried to completion. This at least puts an approximate date on the psalm; it enables us to read the psalm historically. In any case, it is much more than simply a "religious sonnet" without historical meaning.

2. Verses 1-4: Confession with determination.

Not even Samuel and David had succeeded in returning Israel to Yahweh's covenant ways. But, insofar his own home and household is concerned, David has at least made a firm decision: he was going to break with any who would rival the true God. Verses 1b, 2, 4, 5 and 8 register David's radical break with any and all foreign and domestic idols.

Verse 1:

Preserve me, O God, for in thee I take refuge.

Was David in mortal danger? But when was he not in mortal danger? Before his coronation he had Saul to deal with. Afterwards, the sons of Saul and his general, Abner, opposed David. When that opposition had been eliminated, David faced more problems yet. Absalom revolted, and we know that regicides were a common occurrence.

Perhaps David was thinking, not so much about his own physical and dynastic safety, but about his fidelity to God's Word. He may well have been concerned about remaining true to that Word, in view of the widespread apostasy of the age. He may have felt the dangers of idolatry and the temptations of the alluring Canaanite religions. After all, even Solomon succumbed to those temptations when, in fact, the dynasty had long been secured. Perhaps verse 1 should
be read: "Preserve me, O God, from the spirit of the age, for in thee I take refuge". However that may be, David did not resort to military might and foreign alliances to obtain security. He went to Yahweh. And where should we, living amid the spirit of our own times, seek security save with our Lord?

Verse 2:

I say to the Lord, "Thou art my Lord; I have no good apart from thee."

Clearly, David had made a decision. "From now on," he said to Yahweh, "You are the only one for me".

This was not an automatic reaction for an Israelite, even though the Sinai covenant had told him: "I am Yahweh, your God, you shall have no other gods before me". Let's not forget the situation in which David lived. The Age of Judges had only just passed. The reformation had not yet been carried to its conclusion. Throughout the land lived people who served Baals and expected their rewards from gods like Astarte. There were numerous pagan feasts and, of course, the commonly practised prostitution cult. Many Israelites had yielded to these temptations. Considering those conditions, it was not as natural for David to turn to Yahweh as we sometimes suppose.

Verse 3:

As for the saints in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight.

The whole of Israel was a holy nation (Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 14:2; Psalm 34:10). They had been declared "holy" by Yahweh, because He had made them His covenant partners. But the promised land did not belong to the "holy nation" yet. Gibeon, for example, belonged to the Amorites; there were many city-states like that which were still dominated by heathens. David was king over a land which was occupied by both heathens and the holy nation. Saul, for his part, had failed to clear the land. The judges before him had failed to clear the land (Judges 1:27ff.). And
alliances and friendly relations with these heathen people meant mortal danger to the holy nation.

***

David expressed his "delight" in the saints of the land. While it is true that all Israelites were "saints" by virtue of the covenant God made with the people, David was probably referring to the righteous who had remained true to Yahweh and His Sinai covenant. Those were the people whose direction of life was consonant with Yahweh's Torah, people like Hannah and Samuel, for example. They were people whose lives were based on the historical sanctification begun with Abraham and Horeb, people who were "perfect in the fear of God", as the apostle Paul called it (II Corinthians 7:1; cf. Psalm 34:10). These were David's friends....

As we've seen in chapter 3, the saints were most probably the humble and poor in the land. The words "righteous", "humble" and "poor" are often synonymous in the Old Testament. David did not think he was too good for them. It was they who followed him rather than Saul, even into the deprivations of a vagabond existence.

These righteous were not "noble" in the socio-economic sense. Most were people who had been victimized in one way or other by Israel's desertion from God's covenantal terms. But David considered them "saints" and "noble" because they had been made to suffer for righteousness' sake.

Verse 4:

Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their libations of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips.

Heathens could never be certain of their gods' favours. They were required, time and again, to sacrifice to their gods, and even then they could never be sure whether their offerings were sufficient.

Satan had reduced those unfortunate heathens to the most unspeakable follies. Bestiality and sodomy were not uncommon (Deuteronomy 27:21; cf. Genesis-Exodus). The Moabites even had a god, Kamos by name, which required
child sacrifices. When David brought his parents to Moab for safe-keeping (1 Samuel 22:3ff), he was probably confronted with this abominable practice. His reference to "multiplying their sorrows" may well allude to the griefs and sorrows experienced by parents who were required to sacrifice their child to such a god. That Satan knows no compassion is clear from such heinous practises (cf. Leviticus 18:21; II Kings 3:27, 16:3, 17:17, 31, 21:6; II Chronicles 33:6; Psalm 106:36-38; Ezekiel 16:21, 20:31). For Israel, which should have known better, the punishment was doubly severe. These were practises which Yahweh had specifically forbidden in His second commandment; Israelites who nonetheless practised them would become subject to the curse of the Torah (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28-30). The Age of Judges had left plenty of evidence of this curse, as David knew from the power which the Philistines continued to exercise in the promised land.

Psalm 16:4 is still relevant today. Modern man may go about it in a different way, but he has also created his false gods. The most striking form of idolatry today is man's own pretention to autonomy. He has changed the temple of God's Spirit, his own selfhood, into a temple for his own self-worship. Autonomous man, who ostensibly no longer needs Yahweh, is probably the most pointed example of modern idolatry (I Corinthians 3:16ff.; II Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21; II Thessalonians 2:4). There is no need to think that the "son of perdition" is a single person; he probably represents a type of person we encounter all the time in our modern world. Paul portrayed the "son of perdition" or "the antichrist" (I John 2:18) as follows: "the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God" (II Thessalonians 2:4). These men are everywhere in modern, apostate christianity. And it's quite possible that the agony and fear with which they live and which they inflict upon their following is just as disastrous and painful as that suffered by Israelites who left Yahweh and chose to worship another god instead. Much
of today's music, art, philosophy and entertainment are symptoms of a failing and fearful heart, tortured by the meaninglessness of life without norms, life without the security offered by God (cf. H.R. Rookmaker, Modern Art and the Death of a Culture). \( ^7 \)

"What they want to do is up to them", said David, "but I want nothing to do with them". He even refused to name the gods, something God had also forbidden, "Make no mention of the names of other gods, nor let such be heard out of your mouth" (Exodus 23:12; cf. Joshua 23:7; Hosea 2:16; Zephaniah 13:2). It tells us to address ourselves positively, on the basis of the Word of God. There's also such a thing as becoming preoccupied with the evil in this world.

3. Verses 5-8: My chosen portion.

To David, then, idolatry was like the pain of death. In verse 2, he wrote: "Thou art my Lord; I have no good apart from thee". In verses 5-11, he disclosed why this was so.

Verse 5:

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cups; thou holdest my lot.

The word "portion" had a special meaning to the righteous Israelite. It included, not only the sure knowledge of belonging to God's people, but also the land which God had given them by lot. The land which the Lord had given them would be their permanent possession, which, upon their death, would pass to their children by inheritance. No one could take that away from them, not even the king. The only ones not included in this land-inheritance were the Levites, with whom God made a special covenant, of course (Numbers 18:21; Deuteronomy
10:9, 18:1; Joshua 13:14, 33, 14:3; Le
ticus, Numbers-Deuteronomy). Every Israelite, whether
king or Levite, was entitled by the Sinai covenant
to declare, "Yahweh is my chosen portion". (cf.

***

In contrast to the heathens who had to sacrifice
their hard-earned bread, their peace of mind and even
their children in order to win their gods' favour,
David was assured of his Lord. His Lord was his
portion, that is, a gift which no one could take
from him, and a gift for which he was not required
to pay!

Verse 6:

The lines have \( \text{XXIIM} \) for me in pleasant places;
yea, I have a goodly heritage. 13

In verse 5, David had said to God: "thou holdest
my lot". And this was very true; God had secured
the throne for David; God had defeated David's
enemies for him; God had sent the men of Judah
to ask him if he would be their king (II Samuel
2:4, 5:1-5). As Yahweh's undershepherd, he was
given the privilege of caring for Yahweh's sheep.

Undoubtedly, David recognized God's hand in all
this. Caring for His sheep was the greatest of all
tasks.

Verse 7:

I bless the Lord who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.

There's an incredible difference between
the God who gives counsel, even in the night, un-
beknown, and the stoney silence of idols (Psalm
115, 135). But the modern gods of money, sport,
sex, or a host of others, cannot provide counsel
either. Can they speak words of deliverance or com-
fort in times of need? Can they relive the agony and pain of death or serious illness? Can they bring hope in persecution?

We should not forget that David was raised with the Word of God. He was Samuel's pupil; Samuel, in his turn, had been raised by the prophetess Hannah. During his period of exile, David was accompanied by Abiathar, who further instructed him. In addition, the prophets Nathan and Gad instructed him. And all of this instruction was, of course, based on the Torah.

Let's take a concrete example of how this Torah instruction stood David in good stead.

For several years, David was hunted by Saul. Saul was bent on killing David. David, however, had already been anointed by Samuel. What was he to do? Should he take up arms against Saul, mobilize the people against Saul, and say to Saul: "I am now the lawful heir, you have betrayed your trust and must now abdicate"? That's how the Ten Tribes would later settle their differences. On two occasions, David could easily have rid himself of his would-be assassin. Yet he did not. He constantly surrounded himself with men who could teach him the ways of Yahweh. On occasion, he appealed directly to Yahweh through the ephod (I Samuel 23:9-12, 30:7), but on the whole he seems to have relied on the advise of those around him. And what could they teach him? What did Scripture, such as it was, teach David in specific circumstances? The answer was simply to rely on Yahweh's promises, just as Joshua and Caleb had trusted in the promises of Yahweh so many years before. They, too, had been compelled to share the punishment of Yahweh on His unbelieving people. How did Joshua and Caleb respond? By protest or revolution? Rather, they submitted to the will of God and persisted in pointing to the promises of
God. It taught David to submit to the oftimes harshly distorted reality in order to wait patiently for God's deliverance. These are the scriptural teachings which prevented David from taking the law into his own hands, when, for example, he found Saul within his mercy.

***

Yes, David was a righteous man. He was a man of whom Psalm 1 spoke: meditating his law day and night. God had laid claim on David's heart. Man's heart controls his entire life, his life of feeling, his thinking life included. When the Bible speaks of "heart" it usually means the deepest life experience of a man. Asaph was "pricked in the heart", when his soul was embittered (Psalm 73:21). The soul can "rejoice" and the heart "be glad" (Proverbs 23:16). The heart can also "faint" as it did with Job (19:27). For that matter, the Hebrews did not distinguish sharply between "heart" and "soul". (The Dutch even uses "kidneys" for the heart in Psalm 16 --and elsewhere). The point of the verse is, of course, that David's life was filled with the counsel and instruction of the Lord, so much so, that he carefully reviewed at night the instruction he had been given in the day....

The instruction taught him how he should address the enmity and arrogance of his fellow church members and how he should bear himself as long as Yahweh chose to withhold judgment upon His enemies. It taught him patience, faith, trust in the promises of the Lord.

Verse 8:

I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

David walked with God, his Counselor and Defender. David must have aware of the precarious
nature of his position. He must have wondered, at times, how things would work out for him and for the other righteous in Israel. In the end, however, he confessed his faith that, relying on God's Word, he would "not be moved". It was undoubtedly a comfort to him at the time, but we also know from Psalm 15 that his scope extended beyond his present life and death into eternity.

4. Did the Old Testament righteous believe in an afterlife?

I interrupt discussion of the psalm to consider briefly whether the Old Testament faithful believed in eternal life. It's very important for a correct understanding of Psalm 16:9-11. It is generally accepted that they did not. Eternal life is widely thought to have been embraced only in New Testament times. That's why bliss in the Old Testament is thought to have been of an earthly kind, as, for example, in a large, healthy family, a good harvest, and an industrious, wealthy nation at peace. The Old Testament righteous supposedly hoped for blessings in this present life. Their hopes, so the predominant feeling goes, were fixed on the here-and-now, not on the hereafter. The spiritual blessings such as forgiveness of sin, love and eternal life, were creations of the New Testament. Or so it's generally believed.

This concept brings us face to face with an offshoot of Evolutionism. Evolutionism is not just a scientific theory about the origin of man and the world; it has also made its influence felt in theological circles. According to evolutionistic theology --which, by the way, has infiltrated the minds of many who otherwise reject evolutionism--, man's religions show a progression of clearly definable stages, one of which would be the Old Testament and another the New. It is partly as a result of these
artificially imposed "stages" that the Old Testament and the New suddenly find themselves juxtaposed. But evolutionism alone was not to blame. Long before evolutionism had made its appearance, Baptists, following in the footsteps of the Gnostics, had put the Old Testament over against the New. I've discussed Gnosticism earlier; it may safely be called the church's enemy No.1 (I Timothy 6:20; cf. Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy).

If we unwittingly fall into the errors of Gnosticism and its penchant for making contradictions, we end up dividing the Old Testament from the New. We set the Old Testament over against the New, as it were. Psalm 16 becomes unintelligible. We would have to conclude that the expectations of Old Testament figures, such as David in this psalm, did not reach beyond the grave. That's why it is important that we postpone further analysis of the psalm until we can discover exactly what these Old Testament people expected of the future.

Martha.

The faithful in old Israel must have expected life after death. How else could Martha, who, after all, still lived in the context and references of the old covenant, declare of her brother, Lazarus, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"? (John 11:24). She had undoubtedly read about the widow of Zarephath (I Kings 17:22), the son of the Shunammite (II Kings 4:29ff.), and the unknown man who was thrown into Elisha's grave (II Kings 13:21; cf. II Kings 5:7). These were all instances of deceased having been brought back from death. She was also acquainted with the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dead bones. Because Ezekiel, and many in Israel with him, believed in the resurrection of the dead, Ezekiel envisioned the return from captivity in terms of bones which were
in the resurrection of the dead, Ezekiel envisioned the return from captivity in terms of bones which received muscles, flesh and skin and were given life. (Ezekiel 37:1-14; cf. Daniel 12:13).

However, I prefer to limit examples to the time before David, otherwise some, who are under the influence of evolutionistic thinking, might still argue that the later examples --Ezekiel and Daniel-- resulted from a "development in religious consciousness". I shall deal with the earlier examples in the light of Scripture itself. That's really the only rule of thumb; let Scripture explain itself.

The church before the Flood.

Enosh, Adam's grandson, did what centuries later David would also do: seek refuge in God (Genesis 4:26; Psalm 16:1). Early believers based their faith on Yahweh's promises to bring peace and a restoration of intimate communion experienced in paradise. They believed steadfastly that God would give them life.

They also knew, before the Flood had taken place, that God would judge the world before He would establish His community of peace (Jude 14ff.). Enoch prophesied of this coming judgment: "Behold, the Lord came with his holy myriads, to execute judgment on all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness which they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against him". It would be incorrect to say that Enoch was prophesying the coming Flood, because his scope extended beyond that to those mentioned in the previous verses and to those living in Jude's time. According to Jude, Enoch was prophesying the Last Judgment.
The patriarchs.

The faith of the patriarchs should not be taken too lightly either. Paul's epistle to the Hebrews contains some very important things about that. God had said to Abraham: "Fear not Abram, I am your shield...." (Genesis 15:1, 17:1). What did that mean? The New Testament parallel to that promise would be "I have given you the Christ", including everything we normally associate with it, as wisdom, justification, eternal life and whatever it means to be Christ's fellow-heir (Genesis-Exodus, ).

Our Saviour called on the same implicit promise to Abram when he responded to the Saducees' questions about the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33). The words, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob", was intended as proof to the Saducees of the resurrection. After all, God is God "of the living, not the dead". Accordingly, the promise of the resurrection was already implicit in the covenant promises.26

The epistle to the Hebrews also shows that Abraham expected more of the promise than simply the land of Canaan and many descendants. "For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10).27 Old Testament faithful did not receive what was promised—the city—but they had "seen it and greeted it from afar" (Hebrews 10:13). Concerning Abraham, Jesus said: "he rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). According to Hebrews 11:18, the patriarchs anticipated the coming of "the heavenly country", which, again according to the same verse, is the heavenly city which was disclosed to John in the vision and recorded in the book of Revelation. This was the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-22:5). It is also evident, therefore,
that they expected the resurrection and life in the age to come. Abraham confessed this explicitly when he was prepared to offer Isaac, his son: "he considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19). Therefore, the passage in Daniel 12:12,13 is not the first reference to the resurrection of the dead. It appears that Jacob also looked beyond the grave, as is indicated in the passage in Genesis 49:18: "I wait for thy salvation, O Lord". These were words from his death-bed. And what would he await except deliverance from death? Joseph instructed Israel to carry his bones with them to the promised land? Why would he have done so unless he expected the resurrection from the dead? (Joshua, ).

Despite the constant disappointments and griefs suffered by Moses because of Israel's repeated apostasy, he drew strength from the promise of rewards which would be much greater than anything Egypt could offer (Hebrews 11:26). He would have been much more greatly disappointed, ruined and broken, even if he had expected those rewards in the here and now. He was not even allowed to enter the promised land! How could he expect rewards, if not in the life to come? "See now, that I, even I, am he", said Yahweh, "and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal" (Deuteronomy 32:39). This was the expectation which Moses had of the future, and he undoubtedly must have impressed his fellow Israelites with God's power over death....

Prophets and psalmists.

Adam and Eve, Enosh and Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses were all people who lived with the
expectation of eternal life. How else could Hannah have confessed "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up", if this belief had not existed and had not been deeply rooted in the faith-life of the Old Testament Israelite? (I Samuel 2:6).

"Blessed are the meek", said our Saviour, "for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). This is virtually the same as what is written in Psalm 37: "For the wicked shall be cut off /If not now, then at the last judgment, of which Enoch spoke/; but those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land" (37:9). It was a comfort to those suffering the numerous injustices in the Old Testament, for it held out to them the prospects of a better life after death (Hebrews 11:35). God had promised them perfection (Hebrews 11:40).

Did the Old Testament faithful expect eternal life? Undoubtedly they did. Paul was not the first to realize "if in this life we who are in Christ have only hope, we are of all men most to be pitied" (I Corinthians 15:19). Already Moses blessed Israel with the resurrectionist benediction: "The eternal God is your swelling place" (Deuteronomy 33:27). The entire history of Israel is testimony to the confession of Psalm 68: "Our God is a God of salvation; and to God, the Lord, belongs escape from death" (68:20).

5. Verses 9-11: I believe in the resurrection of the body and life eternal.

Now, on to Psalm 16:9-11:

Therefore my heart is gald, and my soul rejoices; my body also dwells secure. For thou dost not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit. Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fulness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.
These three verses show David's joy of anticipation. The thoughts expressed are similar to Paul's famous passage in Romans 8: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life...will be able to separate us from the love in God in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:38,39). David never feared that the bond between himself and God could be broken. Not even death can break the covenant made by God. In verse 8, he had said, "because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved"; verse 9, "therefore my heart is glad", identifies the basis for his expectation, the covenant between God and David. The covenant was the cause of David's delight, even as the covenant is the source of our joy and expectation, despite the fact that we live in a dispensation which is surrounded on all sides by death. The promise is for the resurrection on the Last Day.

David expressed his joy in poetic forms common in those days. Semitic poets loved to use various parallel constructions in which they would say virtually the same thing in slightly different ways. Terms like "my soul", "my heart", "my body" and "thy godly one" all refer to one and the same person, the complete person David. Each word may have somewhat different nuances, but they all boil down to the same thing, namely David. We should not make the mistake of thinking that David felt that only part of his being would be rescued from Sheol. It has, of course, often been thought that the soul would be resurrected while the "rest" of man did simply not matter. Notice, however, that David did not make these distinctions. He used "heart", "soul", "body" and "thy godly one" interchangeably and almost synonymously. Of course, David did not mean he would not die, or that he would not be buried. But he did mean that he, as total person, would not be left in Sheol forever. As Jesus said: "...if any one keeps my word, he will never see death for eternity" (John 8:51).
The author translated verse 11a "thou dost show me the path of life" in the future: "thou shalt show me the path of life". And, indeed, the present construction in the R.S.V. has future meaning, especially considering verse 11c: "pleasures for evermore" (cf. Proverbs 2:19, 3:16, 5:6). The path of life, then, refers to eternal life. If verse 10 and the parallel patterns exhibited by parts a, b, and c of verse 11 are taken together, and if the expectations of eternal life held by the Old Testament faithful are added to it, we cannot escape the conclusion that verse 11, and indeed the whole psalm, has an eschatological message. Clearly, David knew that he would be resurrected. It is not possible, given the evidence of this psalm, together with proofs found elsewhere in Scripture, to deny the resurrection or to claim that Old Testament believers had no expectations for eternal life.

The "how" is not made clear in the psalm; in fact, we know little more about the details of the resurrection. But the fact that the resurrection will take place was not problematic for David.

6. What Psalm 16 meant to Peter and Paul.

The early Christians particularly loved Psalm 16. Peter preached on it after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and Paul in the synagogue in Antioch, Pisidia. How did they read Psalm 16?

Peter's Pentecost sermon.

Led by the Holy Spirit, Peter accused Jerusalem Jews and Diaspora pilgrims for their judicial murder of Jesus of Nazareth. "You have killed Him", proclaimed Peter, "but God has raised Him from the dead!" As proof, he quoted Psalm 16. Referring to verses 8 through 11, he explained the psalm in a way which,
at first glance, seems to contradict what I have been saying. "Brethren", explained Peter, "I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon the throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption" (Acts 2:29-31). But I thought that David had spoken of his own resurrection. Was that not right? Did Peter here claim that Psalm 16 can only be applied to Jesus Christ?

***

Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, (Acts 2:4). In other words, Peter was an active instrument of the Author of Scripture. Had Peter spoken for himself only, it might be concluded that his message referred only to the resurrection of Jesus. But since the message came from God Himself, it is clear that the passage has a deeper meaning than might be supposed. And since the word came from God Himself, it is only right that we include not only this particular passage, but the entire Word of God.

First of all, we have to be clear about Peter's focus. Whom was he speaking about, David or Jesus? He was talking about Jesus' resurrection, and he did not intend to deny David's hope for the resurrection. He quoted Psalm 16 as proof of Jesus' resurrection. When he said "his tomb is with us to this day", it was not to suggest that David would remain in his grave eternally. Peter would probably not object if, in order to make Psalm 16 understandable and to illumine David's expectations, we were to add the word "yet" to his passage, to read "his tomb
is yet with us to this day", indicating thereby that David would some day share in the resurrection. On that Day, when Christ returns, David would be resurrected from Sheol and take his place among the just within the heavenly Jerusalem.

Because Psalm 16 is prophetic in nature, Peter used it to demonstrate that David was not just speaking of himself, but also anticipated the coming of his Son, Jesus. Scripture often uses the name "David" in a "generic" sense to refer to all those, and especially Jesus, who would be of the house of "David". This generic relationship between the first David and the seed of David, Jesus, is presupposed in Peter's explanation of this psalm. Peter's message does not force a choice between either David or Jesus, but illustrates that Psalm 16 prophesies of the resurrection of both David and Jesus.

Paul's sermon in Antioch.

This is also true of Paul's address to the synagogue audience in Antioch. His intent was not to deny David's resurrection. David's resurrection was not an issue; it was not the point. Paul's point was to prove Jesus's resurrection on the basis of Psalm 16. Paul's explanation of verse 10 was: "Thou wilt not let thy Holy One see corruption. For David, after he had served the counsel of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid with his fathers, and saw corruption; but he whom God raised up saw no corruption" (Acts 13:35-37).

Evidently, Paul read Psalm 16 just as Peter did. Its conclusion was: I shall die, but I shall not remain dead. This expectation was fulfilled first of all by Jesus; He became the "first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (I Corinthians 15:20).
It has been roughly three thousand years since David recorded his hopes for life eternal in Psalm 16. However long it may take for Christ to return, the time for David is short, the twinkling of an eye. That's how it is with us; we await the coming of Christ for a lifetime, and after that the ages are compressed into mere moments (Leviticus, 32). Let us therefore join David, and, with him, millions of other faithful who, from the beginning, have placed their hopes for eternity on the assurances of God. With God at our right hand, we shall never be moved, because He, true to His promises, will remain with us through this life and the next....
Let's be honest: how many of us would dare say that? Would you not feel a little ill at ease saying: "I have walked in my integrity; prove me, Yahweh, and try me; test my heart and my mind. I do not sit with false men, nor do I consort with dissemblers; I wash my hands in innocence, and go about thy altar, O Yahweh"? Or, to put it into today's language: "I attend church regularly, contribute faithfully; I have no friends who are of this world, and wash my hands in innocence"?

Doesn't that smack just a bit of complacency or self-delusion? Does it not sound suspiciously like the prayer of the Pharisee, who said: "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get"? (Luke 18:11ff.). Is Psalm 26 pharisaistic?

1. Pharisaistic?

To many an exegete, that question is not even necessary; they feel it undoubtedly is pharisaistic. Some morally sensitive christians are even offended by the psalm. Others feel it is the epitome of self-righteousness and hypocrisy. Some rationalize the poet's feelings by pointing out that he lived in the "old dispensation", and just didn't know any better. Requirements in the Old Testament, they argue, were not as demanding as they are now; therefore, it's quite understandable that an Old Testament believer could convince himself that he had fulfilled all the law's conditions.
The psalm is really sub-Christian, they say. The poet apparently had no idea of what Jesus really required when He said: ...when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty' (Luke 17:10). One critic's condemnation of the psalm lumped the psalmist among those who feel "no need of a physician" (Luke 5:31), although he was willing to admit that there were others in Israel who had not fallen to the depths of depravity which obviously held the psalmist. By contrast, the critics argue, the penance psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 106, 130, 143) are much more "Christian" and therefore infinitely more meaningful to us; "If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who would stand?" Such verses are much more to their liking (Psalm 130:3).

But what is your reaction?

We probably all recoil from such liberalistic criticism. But, again, let's be honest: do you not sympathize, however slightly, with the criticisms? Was the psalmist not overdoing it? Doesn't it sound like gloating and breast-beating? Do we not often tend to agree that Psalm 130 ("Out of the depths I cry to thee") is more appropriate, at least to our New Testament senses, than is Psalm 26?

Pharisee or tax-collector....

It's appalling how Higher Criticism has succeeded in infiltrating the hearts of so many honest people. Is it perhaps because modern religious sensibilities are willing to recognize only two life-styles, that of the Pharisee and that of the tax-collector? Are there no other "types"?

The Pharisees --and implicit in the criticism, also the psalmist--, were people who chose to live without God's grace. They were the ones who had distorted the covenant into a kind of "labour contract", 
with a host of very precise regulations and conditions. They were the "savants", the ones who "had it made". They were the Israelites "who had Abraham for father" and "what else do we need?". For them, religious life was identified with ostentatious praying at every street-corner, imposing severe restrictions on sabbath activities, etc. (Matthew 3:9; 23:28, Matthew 6, 12:1-8, 23:23; Luke 18:11ff.).

Should the Pharisee, and, by implication, the psalmist, serve as our model?

By contrast, the tax-collector is a much more excellent model, many feel. He wasn't perfect, but then, who is? At least, he knew the depths of his depravity and begged for forgiveness, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" At least, he received the Lord's blessing: "...this man went down to his house justified..." (Luke 18:13,14).

And because our reference is limited to these two "types", we naturally choose for the tax-collector. We can readily identify with him, because, after all, "we are all sinners!"

By forcing a choice between these two types, Psalm 26 becomes meaningless, and, indeed, also similar psalms such as 5, 7, 17, 18, 44. Those psalms are at least as "shocking" as Psalm 26! Listen to Psalm 7: "O Lord my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands...." (verse 3)

Psalm 18: "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all his ordinances were before me, and his statutes I did not put away from me. I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from guilt. Therefore the Lord has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight" (!) (verses 20-24).
Psalm 44 has an entire church "breast-beating"!
"All this has come upon us / a defeat in battle/
though we have not forgotten thee, or been false
to thy covenant. Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from thy way, that thou
shouldst have broken us...." (verse 17ff.).

When was the last time you heard christians speaking like that? One of the reasons we hear very little of that is because of the choice which is almost "forced" upon us, the choice between the Pharisee "type" and the tax-collector "type". But it's just not true that we have to make that choice. It's just not true that we are all "sinners", often by virtue of the choice we have made in favour of the tax-collector, who knew himself to be a "sinner". There is a third choice in Scripture, a third "type", namely the righteous!

Integrity does not mean sinless!

"I have walked in my integrity", said David. The Hebrew word for "integrity" used in this psalm is virtually the same as the word for "blameless" found in Genesis 17:1, WHENX when God recapitualed all the terms of His covenant with Abraham in one simple phrase, "...walk before me and be blameless". The same word also appeared in Psalm 15, and was translated with "blamelessly" (cf. § 7). "Integrity" then, is synonymous with "blameless".

When God told Abraham to walk before Him blamelessly, He did not for one moment think that Abraham would not sin. He did not expect sinlessness from any of His loyal covenant partners. To walk before God blamelessly, with an undivided heart, does not mean that. There is no "ideal" man. One of the problems we encounter is that we've inherited from Humanism and the Renaissance the concept of an "ideal man", whom we should emulate. The "ideal men" of
Humanism and Renaissance were usually Greek or Roman "notables", men of high character and supreme virtue, of great accomplishment and unequalled learning, men who were often immortalized in marble, bronze or verse. They were men who did not sin, or so we are led to believe; only their greatness was publicised --and, no doubt, exaggerated--, while their follies were discreetly forgotten.... Unfortunately, having fallen under the influence of this superman-worship, we often think that only the most excellent and exemplary of christians are worthy of being called "righteous". But is that what God's Word says? No; in the psalms, and in practically every other book of the Bible, we find people who both sin and are righteous, even though they sin. We read "forgive all my sins" for the first time in Psalm 25 (25:18), to be followed, shortly thereafter, by "may integrity and uprightness preserve me" (verse 21), proving that, though sin and righteousness are polar opposites, they are both to be found in one and the same person. Psalm 41 has much the same message. First: "O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against thee!", and then: "thou hast upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in thy presence for ever"! (Psalm 41:4,12). How does this fit into the forced dichotomy of "either Pharisee or tax-collector"? It doesn't, of course.... Psalmists were quite happy to confess their sins to Yahweh, while at the same time they confessed their righteousness. How can one "confess" righteousness? Righteousness does not come about through proper or "ideal" behaviour; righteousness is a gift of the covenant of Yahweh! Righteousness, as we saw earlier, was remaining true to the covenant terms of Yahweh, consciously choosing to walk in the way of Yahweh.
Blameless members of the covenant.

Did such blameless people ever exist? Scripture is full of them, as we saw in our discussion of Psalm 15. We know the names of some of them (cf. § 7 re-Psalm 15:2). They were faithful who, although certainly not sinless, walked with undivided heart.

I personally do not doubt the intent of those who say, "oh well, in the final analysis, we're all sinners". The intent may be right, the accuracy is not (cf. § 4). A "sinner" is a person who is wicked, who had deliberately chosen to forsake the covenant ways of the Lord. "Sinner" is not the proper nomenclature for people who walk uprightly, upheld by the Lord. Faithful christians have every right to call to task a minister of the Word, who enthusiastically proclaims: "Congregation, we are all of us sinners!" It's just not so; that's the quintessence of Psalm 26! David specifically asked God in this psalm "not to sweep him away with sinners, nor his life with bloodthirsty men"!

The "Pharisee-tax-collector" polarity does not wash.

The polarity between the two "types", Pharisee or tax-collector, cannot be maintained. Scripture points out a division, but it's not between these two. The division, the demarcation line or front we discussed earlier, is between those who are loyal to the covenant and those who are not. They are known, respectively, as the righteous and the wicked. And the demarcation line runs right through the middle of God's people.

We must not allow the false distinctions to confuse us. John the Baptist addressed his call for repentance to both tax-collectors and Roman soldiers on the one hand, and Pharisees and Saducees on the other. The Pharisees represented, we might say, the ultra-conservative wing in the Israelite church,
while the Saducees represented the liberal free-thinking part of the church. Our Lord Jesus called not just tax-collectors, but also warned Scribes and Pharisees about their erroneous life-style (Matthew 23).

In conclusion, the front in Scripture is not between Pharisees and tax-collectors. The two must be distinguished, of course, but the distinction is rather between the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and the unrighteousness of the tax-collector. The front is between wicked and righteous. Now, the appalling thing is that among the wicked we find not merely the tax-collector "type" --crooked businessmen, perhaps, or prostitutes--, but also seemingly pious, godfearing church leaders! Despite their religious veneer, they are on the wrong side of the demarcation line! It may be profitable, when thinking about the "wicked", to keep in mind that they were in effect guilty before God. Their guilt was not, in first instance, the result of some specific crime, such as flesh peddling or drug trafficking or embezzlement, but it was the result of adopting a way of life which led them away from the covenant. This guilt could just as well apply to apparently upstanding members of the church community who have not committed an overt crime, but who have nonetheless deserted the covenant.

***

Is the psalm Pharisaistic? If we're caught in the false dilemma created by the Pharisee-tax-collector polarity, we must admit that it is! The psalm is clearly not a prayer that would warm a tax-collector's heart! Psalm 26 is a prayer of the righteous, people who faithfully and consciously follow covenant ways!

It is reassuring to be able to pray the words of Psalm 26.

Psalm 5, 7, 17 and 26 are sometimes called
"Psalms of Innocence". This is not quite accurate, because the awareness of innocence lived among all the psalmists. Psalm 26 is not a special song, written by a very special man --a typical super-saint-- for the very few. The psalm is for all of God's people. The psalm may be called unique in the sense that the psalmist is very clearly conscious of the fact that he belongs to the righteous, and, indeed, appeals to God, as it were, for confirmation. That's exactly the element which the "polarists" find so objectionable. The christian who has rejected this polarity, however, finds the psalm reassuring and liberating. "Why", asks the psalmist, "why should I be equated with sinners and bloodthirsty men?...I have served Yahweh with an undivided heart! How should I be declared guilty when in fact I'm innocent?"

All the righteous may speak like that; in fact, they should speak like that. Why else would the Holy Spirit have included Psalm 26 in God's Holy Word?

When we justly fear the Lord, when we consciously set our footsteps in His way, then, all our sins notwithstanding, we may not count ourselves among the sinners but must include ourselves among the just. Abraham was just, yet he did not always act in faith; David was just, even though he committed some pretty outrageous sins; Zacharias was just, but he dared to doubt the word of an angel; Joseph of Arimathea was just, though he was originally reluctant to choose for the Lord.

It is not pharisaistic to know you belong to that circle of believers. It is also not pharisaistic to confess it openly, as David did in Psalm 26 or as Job did in the company of his undiscerning friends who almost threatened to lump him together with wicked unbelievers.
Yet another cause for misunderstanding Psalm 26.

The second cause for misunderstanding Psalm 26 is the fact that most people seem to have forgotten that they live in a covenantal relationship. How many christians today are convinced of the existence of a covenant, or realize its impact for their lives? How many read the Bible as Book of God's covenant unified through the ages by the stream of successive generations of believers with whom God has made His own personal/insurance? How many are genuinely struck by the unity of God's people through all time? How many take at face value the promise God has made to that people, to deliver them, as an organic nation, from death and destruction and to bring them, as co-heirs of Jesus, into His new Kingdom? Either christians ask, thoroughly perplexed, "What's that you say?, or they fretfully sigh, "Ah, if only I could be sure...." 10 Not sure? Not sure that we are "children of the Kingdom", "sheep of His fold", and "members of His household"? If that's the way it is, it's sad indeed. Then we're very like the monk from chapter 2, who felt obliged to invent numerous "religious activities" in order to make himself "right with God". Many mediaeval christians sought their salvation in similar contrivances: in/pilgrimages, in expensive indulgences, in endless fasts, in fearful flaggelations. Many offered the pure joys of life, of family, of children and many other God-given blessings to the sterile walls of abbeys and monasteries. There are still many who consider themselves less than Judas, unworthy of any of God's promises. Is that just toward God who has considered us worthy of virtually everything? Have we forgotten why He created us? Have we forgotten that the covenant He made with His people included the mediaeval believer and includes us today? Is that covenant not our sole assurance?
Denying the covenant reduces the psalms to obscure occultism or self-righteous hypocrisy. The psalms, after all, are based on the covenant. I've earlier called them Songs of the Covenant. To lack the solidity of faith in God's covenantal promises, to lack knowledge of the covenant as foundation of our redemption must result in the search for all kinds of surrogate religiosity.

How can any psalm, whether it be the allegedly pharisaistic Psalm 26 or the so-called "Psalms of Innocence", make sense to us if we remove the footing upon which they were built??

2. Verses 1-12: "Prove me and try me".

According to the inscription, Psalm 26 is a psalm of David, and there's no good reason to doubt this. The historical situations alluded to in the psalm are familiar: danger (verse 9); yearning for redemption (verse 11); and oppression. All this and more had been experienced by David when, as a young man, he was hunted by king Saul. David was spared nothing, from the relentless pursuits to the most vicious whisper campaigns. In order to justify his actions against David, Saul had to invent the most defamatory slander against him. Naturally, as always happens, there were probably many who were all too ready to believe any and all ill said of David. In later life, there were still some who continued to bad-mouth and conspire against him, as in the case of Absalom's rebellion. For years, Absalom had undermined his father's authority (II Samuel 15:2ff.). David was accused of not dealing righteously with the nation. That was the approach taken by Absalom to deceive the people and poison their feelings towards David. And what were Absalom's real intentions? Did he perhaps plan to prosecute his own father for
high treason? It must have been a terrible time for David to have his own son lump him together with sinners and bloodthirsty men.... Indeed, Psalm 26 could easily have been written by David. Perhaps it was a timely prayer for justice from God; he surely couldn't expect it from those around him, not even his own son....

Because, and this cannot be doubted, David was righteous! Read the New Testament testimony of David's righteousness: "I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will" (Acts 13:22; cf. I Samuel 13:14). Even when he was young, he could not endure that the name of his God was used in vain, and, fully assured of Yahweh's support, he answered Goliath's challenge (I Samuel 17). Afterwards, when he had Saul in his clutches, so to speak, he refused to lift his hand against the Lord's anointed. He knew what that would mean. So, twice he spared Saul's life, though, in fact, Saul had by this time ruined any chance for continuing his rule. David made the lowly cave of Adullam a refuge for his small band of persecuted, but righteous, soldiers. Afterward, he confessed to the Lord that he would like nothing better than to build Yahweh a proper house, but the Lord replied that He would sooner build up David's house. Throughout his life, he composed his songs of praise and prayer, which have been handed down from generation to generation until they have reached us, and continue to inspire and prophesy as they did then. And a righteous one was portrayed by some as wicked and bloodthirsty sinner! And today he is vilified by some as a sanctimonious and self-righteous hypocrite!
Who could uphold David's right when the highest judge of the land, the king, sought his life? Who could uphold David's right when later he was driven from his own court by his conspiratorial son and his ambitious henchmen? Who could uphold Naboth's right when even the justices of the land committed perjury on orders from the king? And who could uphold the rights of so many thousands in the sixteenth century, who were hounded openly by the church of the Inquisition and its merchants of death? In historical situations such as these, the faithful have every right to call on God in the spirit of Psalm 26.

Verse 1:

Vindicate me, O Lord,
for I have walked in my integrity,
and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.

No, David did not sigh that "we are all sinners", or that "we are no better than our enemies", or that "we must learn to love each other more", or any such generalities. It's not that David considered himself above that, but that was not the point. When David knew he had sinned, as in the incident with Uriah the Hittite, he was not above humbling himself and making a clean breast of it: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight...Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:4ff.). Whereupon the prophet Nathan assured David: "The Lord also has put away your sin" (II Samuel 12:13). But Psalm 26 is about an entirely different matter; in this matter, David knew himself to be righteous before God. That's why he didn't say, "Against thee have I sinned", but rather called upon God to be his witness that he had been dealt with unjustly.
David did not decide, one day, to explain to the people how righteous he was. Psalm 26 was the product of his grief and indignation at having been identified with the wicked. David did the only thing he could have done under the circumstances: he appealed to God as his witness in order that God would show His righteousness to David and the people of Israel 13a.

Verse 2:

Prove me, 0 Lord, and try me; test my heart and my mind.

Generally speaking, we don't like to have people know everything about us. Each man's heart has its own secrets. But when a person is called to appear before a judge, there are times when he would like to bare his soul to prove his innocence. That's how it was with David. He was presenting his case before the Lord. He wanted the Lord to look him in the heart. He placed his heart in the crucible to prove to the Lord that he loved Him, and that, consequently, he was righteous.

It's comforting to know that we may do this; that God can judge and bring His righteousness even though we may have been deserted by all around us. He knows how much we love Him; He knows the extent of our righteousness.

***

This is how Jeremiah also prayed. Without cause, his townspeople plotted to be rid of him. When Jeremiah discovered this, he turned to Yahweh in the spirit of Psalm 26: "But, 0 Lord of hosts, who judgest righteously, who triest the heart and the mind, let me see thy vengeance upon them, for to thee have I committed my cause...thou, 0 Lord, knowest me; thou seest me, and triest my mind toward thee" (Jeremiah 11:20-12:3).
Verse 3:

For thy steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to thee.

David was fully aware of God's grace which established the covenant with Israel, and His faithfulness which upheld it. May we suspect such a man of hypocrisy?

May we think ill of him when he confessed to "walk in faithfulness"? Are we also to think ill of the poet of Psalm 119, who made similar confessions, such walking in the truth of God's Word, walking by its light, his wealth and wisdom?

***

What does God's Word require of man? If we are going to criticise David, we must also have an idea what God's Word asks of us. Psalm 1 was very clear about that. There are three things—which the righteous do not do, and which identify them as righteous: they do not walk according to the principles of the wicked, they do not stand in the way of sinners, and they do not sit in the seat of scoffers. Well, what about David?

Verse 4 and 5:

I do not sit with false men, nor do I consort with dissemblers; I hate the company of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked.

David did not have intimate relations with "false men". Who were these false men? It's been thought that they were idolators. There were certainly enough of them during David's time (cf. § 8,1). He wanted nothing to do with dissemblers. He knew that true religion was this: "to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27, 4:4). True religion, to David, was primarily separation from wicked men and their activities. David always
respected the demarcation line between the righteous and the wicked.

Verses 6-8:

O wash my hands in innocence, and go about thy altar, O Lord, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all thy wondrous deeds. O Lord, I love the habitation of thy house, and the place where thy glory dwells.

In effect, this is the same as what Psalm 1 said earlier about "delighting in the law" and "meditating on it day and night". David was glad to be able to live that close to God, glad to have access to the Lord's house and altar. Is it still possible to suspect David of hypocrisy? Is it not rather that David saw the altars of the Lord as the means through which he received forgiveness for his sin?

***

Psalm 26 can be sub-divided as follows:

1. David's prayer for justice, on the basis of his own confessed righteousness before God, made possible by the covenant promise; v. 1-3;

2. what David avoided doing, v. 4-5;

3. what David did positively, v. 6-8;

4. repetition of prayer and affirmation of innocence, v. 9-12.

Verses 9-12:

Sweep me not away with sinners, nor my life with bloodthirsty men, men in whose hands are evil devices, and whose right hands are full of bribes. But as for me, I walk in my integrity; redeem me, and be gracious to me. My foot stands on level ground; in the great congregation I will bless the Lord.
These closing verses repeat the theme of the prayer in verses 1-3. Perhaps David was reminded of what had happened to Saul and Nabal, who were "swept away". In verse 11, David emphasises his "innocence", his "blamelessness", his "perfection of heart" and his "righteousness".

3. The tenor of Psalm 26 can be heard throughout Scripture.

I have already observed that Psalm 26 is not a "special" psalm, written by an exceptional saint for a select circle of righteous people. The psalm is for all. Some may consider it "hypocritical" or "offensive" to the soul sensitive to sin, but its tenor is consistent with what is found throughout Scripture. Psalms 5, 7, 17, 18 and 44 have similar tenors. I should like to appeal to several other passages in Scripture, in which other righteous people appealed to Yahweh on the basis of their righteousness. This will prove that Psalm 26 is certainly no exception.

Job.

Job was a man who was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil (Job 1:1). Even after Satan had deprived Job of virtually everything, God still said of him: "He still holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause" (Job 2:3). Though the Lord knew there was no cause, Job's friends tried to find a cause for his suffering.

It's not that Job was without sin. On the contrary: "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one" (Job 14:4). In this case, however, Job knew himself to be righteous and therefore could not admit guilt to his friends. Let's not forget, that neither Job nor his friends knew anything about the conversation between God and Satan. His response to the interrogations of his friends was delivered in the spirit of Psalm 26: "Far be it from me to
say that you are right; till I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days" (Job 27:5,6).

But did he not know that "all men are sinners" and that we have no right of appeal? Did he not know that the root of all evil is lodged in the human heart, even though he may not have committed an overtly sinful act? Why did he not repent of his sin and throw himself at the mercy of his God? Why did he not plead "Purge me with hyssop...and blot out all my iniquities"? (Psalm 51). Why did he not beat his breast in the fashion of the model tax-collector??

Because Job was not a sinner....

He was not the tax-collector, and he was also not David who, using the words of Psalm 51, expressed his penitence for a specific crime he had committed. Job in this instance was called upon to defend his right, or rather the right which God had given him, as David did in Psalm 26.

Oh yes, he was a man, born of woman, impure and sinful. Only, that was not the point. It can be so very dangerous to simply lump everyone under the general category of "sinner"; this is often done in strictly orthodox circles. But then, what is the meaning of the biblical front between sinners and righteous?

The principal confrontation was between God and Satan, with Satan trying to push Job into the corner of sinners, trying "to sweep him away", to use the words of Psalm 26. Satan used Job's friends and even his wife to bring that about. The only recourse Job had was his appeal to his righteousness, because he knew that God had made him righteous and he would never betray that grace.

He was righteous, a child of God; and he walked as a righteous man. When he was called upon to suffer, he did it without cause, unrighteously, so to speak.
When Isaiah, in name of Yahweh, had announced Hezekiah's death to him, Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed: "Remember now, 0 Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in thy sight" (II Kings 20:3).

And it was undoubtedly true. He had done a great deal for God's people (II Kings 18:3,13-37, 19:1-37; II Chronicles 29-31). But was it proper of him to say so? Was this not a typical "death-bed confession"? Could Yahweh possibly honour it? Was it not a trifle superficial? Apparently, Yahweh was so impressed by Hezekiah's appeal to the covenant that He sent Isaiah with yet another message to the king: "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you" (II Kings 20:5; Isaiah 38:5).

It was Yahweh himself who taught His people such appeals.

Such appeals are not insolent. On the contrary, such appeals were made on God's instruction! When the faithful Israelite had fulfilled the terms of the covenant, not sinlessly but nevertheless faithfully, he was to say to Yahweh: "I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow, according to all thy commandment which thou hast commanded me; I have not transgressed any of thy commandments, neither have I forgotten them; I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or offered any of it to the dead; I have obeyed the voice of the Lord my God, I have done according to all that thou hast commanded me...." (Deuteronomy 26:13-14).

It was more than a privilege, it was a command, to address God on the basis of one's righteousness.

Nehemiah.

It's also remarkable what Nehemiah dared to say to Yahweh. Several times, he said to God: "Remember for my good,
0 my God, all that I have done for this people" (Nehemiah 5:19, 13:14, 22, 31). In addition, he reminded Yahveh of the good he had done to the people while he was governor and emphasised that he had not overtaxed the people, but instead had given them food paid for out of his own pocket (Nehemiah 5:14-19).

Peter.

Some might still object that this is typical "Old Testament" talk, reflecting a very superficial awareness of guilt. But Peter took a similar attitude in the New Testament. Shortly after he had denied his Lord, not once, but three times, Jesus asked him, "Do you love me?" Whereupon a depressed and guilt-ridden Peter replied: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" (John 21:17).

The rich young ruler.

What should we say of the rich young ruler who approached Jesus, asking to be saved? When Jesus had read him the commands, he replied, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth". Did Jesus admonish him for his reply? Did Jesus sternly remind him of his original sin, the root of all evil lodged in the heart? No, instead Jesus acknowledged the young man's deeds, but added, having come to love him: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mark 10).

Paul.

Of all the apostles, Paul was most explicit and elaborate about God's forgiving grace in Christ Jesus. And yet, he, too, retains his awareness and conviction of righteousness in the face of his opponents in Corinth, (II Corinthians 10-12). And he was bold to write to the congregation in Thessalonika: "You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our behaviour to you believers" (II Thessalonika 2:10).

***
God's people may always appeal to the Father's justice on the basis of their own righteousness. But, as I've already observed, the idea of christians being a people of God, and of christians being able to appeal to God on the basis of His covenant promises, is all but non-existent...And that's very unfortunate! How many of us would be so bold as to quote a Job or a Paul, and hold to, or depend on, our righteousness before God? There's a danger that our own little faith reduces us to fearful, whimpering, pitiful creatures who are no longer sure of God's covenant grace, and therefore not sure of their own righteousness. It's time we learned to read Psalm 26 in terms of the covenant. It, too, is one of the Songs of the Covenant.

4. Thank God, Psalm 26 is for all God's people!

Admittedly, all our deeds are "like a polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6). It's also true that we are covered with sin, and that God is like a consuming fire. There are many more similar passages which might be quoted to "contradict" the tenor of Psalm 26.

I also agree that there are times when Psalm 26 is not appropriate to the moment. For example, if it's just not true. If we love the ways of the world, that is, sit with false men, consort with dissemblers, accompany evildoers and caworth with the wicked, Psalm 26 becomes a curse, upon which we will be called into judgment. Compare also John 15:2,6: "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away...and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned".

***

However, we must also read Isaiah 64 accurately, if it's to mean anything. From the context it appears that the nation no longer listened to Yahweh (verse 7), but had instead sought its own counsel. Hence, the deeds were "like a polluted garment". We know that "works without faith are dead". And as far as God's wrath is concerned, it's not a consuming fire for the righteous, but only for the wicked, including those seemingly
pious church members who nevertheless refuse to humble themselves and seek forgiveness (Isaiah 33:14-18). But to the righteous, God gave His Word full of promises. God loves His people and He constantly dwells among them. There is no reason to try to instill fear where it is not wanted. God has cleansed us with the blood of reconciliation and continues to do so daily. Why should we offend God by minimizing His love and mercy?

For the doubting Thomases among us, I should like to raise this question: Are you familiar with the magnanimity of God? Do you know how long-suffering He is? Let's put it this way: it isn't easy to become a sinner, nor was it easy in the days of old Israel. Let me give two examples.

Carrion meat (an anecdote).

A farmer from Tekoa walks into his pasture one early morning to find one of his sheep lying dead on the ground. Evidently the animal had been attacked by a wild boar during the night. Had it been a lion or a fox, there would have been nothing left. The cadaver was pretty much intact; the boar must have been enraged by something, killed his nearest victim and left. A thought comes to the farmer's mind: why not roast it for supper? But then he is immediately reminded of the law of the Torah: you shall not eat carrion meat. Still, it seems like such a waste....

The temptation was too great for the farmer. He carried the remains home and instructed his wife to prepare it for supper. He thereby clearly violated the law of God. Was he therefore a sinner?

No. It wasn't that simple. It's true, of course, that God had forbidden Israel to eat carrion meat, because it represented death. It could be fed to animals or possibly given to foreigners, but Israelites were not to eat it. Still, if he did eat of it, he was not summarily dismissed from the covenant and swept away with unbelievers and sinners. God, in His mercy, had provided for atonement: if he has eaten, he would be unclean for one day and his clothes needed to be
washed (Leviticus 11:39ff., 17:15ff.). God never acts with haste when it comes to disciplining his children; He will never allow His children to fall into "unrighteousness", regardless of the sin, provided they continue to "walk in their integrity". That's compassion!

Divorce.

A second example is divorce, which was also a great evil in the sight of Yahweh. It might be supposed that those who were divorced were promptly dismissed from the community. But this was not the case. While divorce remained a grievous offense in the eyes of Yahweh, He was nevertheless patient with His people. Levites, in any event, were not permitted to marry divorcees, but for the rest Yahweh was surprisingly tolerant (Leviticus 21:7,14). The divorced daughter of a priest was allowed to return home and "eat of her father's food", which, of course, was dedicated (Leviticus 22:13). Divorced women were also permitted to make a vow or swear a pledge, implying they had the same status as any Israelite (Numbers 30:9). When man and woman separated, the man was required to give her a "bill of divorce", to protect her in the event she found another man. Without such a bill, she could be charged with adultery. These regulations illustrate sufficiently that Yahweh continued to care for those who had committed serious sins (Deuteronomy 24:1; cf. Numbers-Deuteronomy, ).

These two examples demonstrate God's leniency when His people failed to live up to the ideal of the Law and succumbed to their sinful inclinations. Many insensitive and sinful Israelites submitted to temptation and transgression, from unlawfully eating carrion meat to separation and divorce, and still be considered righteous.

I could cite many more examples in order to demonstrate God's enduring compassion. None were sinless; from an "ethical" standpoint, they left much to be desired. Some of the kings failed to remove the Canaanite high places, and yet
it was said of them, "they did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh". Sinning does not necessarily make a person a "sinner". Only "oathbreaking", betraying the covenant of Yahweh, could reduce a man to a sinner (Genesis—Exodus). There are those who are so obsessed by ethical standards and outright moralism that they have lost sight of the fundamental principle, according to which men are either righteous or sinners. That principle is the course of one's life. I cannot emphasise that enough. And however sinful and imperfect David and his deeds may have been, the course of his life was true.

Psalm 26 as peace offering?

Do you experience a great love for our God and a yearning for His Word? Do you find your delight in singing His praises in the congregation of the covenant? Then let's not forget Psalm 26! False accusations and persecutions are not prerequisites. And, in any case, you may wish to sing the psalm in remembrance of those whom you know to be persecuted and falsely accused. We can also sing the psalm when we have been saved from temptation or spared from great evil by God's grace. We can sing when we experience peace between God and ourselves. At such times, Israelites would often bring a peace offering, when nothing was wrong, when the bond between God and His people was strong. Was Psalm 26 sung on such occasions?

In any event, it can aptly serve as a song of thanksgiving for us, who know ourselves to be children of the living God through His grace in Christ Jesus, and who are determined to maintain the course He has laid out for us in His covenant. We should be able to say, without hesitation and fear of disapproving glances, "I have walked in my integrity".
For several days now, it's been oppressively hot. The humidity has been uncomfortably high, and you that it will all soon come apart in one of those midsummer thunderstorms. Already thunderheads are forming, building higher and higher into the summer sky. The front is gathering strength, driving before it ominous masses of thick, heavy clouds pregnant with rain. The birds have disappeared, fled from the oncoming violence to shelter and safety. The neighbor's dog whimpers and whines and seeks his refuge under the porch. The wind starts to blow, briskly at first, then it gradually dies to a sigh. Evening has fallen upon mid-afternoon and has swallowed it up. It is getting darker still as grotesque shapes and spectres thrust under the thunderheads and blacken the entire sky. Suddenly, a blinding flash and an immediate report. Again response, the winds strike out again, more fiercely this time, lashing through trees and shrieking through telephone wires. Again a flash, followed shortly by another, and yet another. Thunder rolls almost continually now. Then come the rains. Slowly at first, with large drops that splatter impressively against the window panes. Then, wind and rain build up their crescendo, working in harmony now, battering the glass and bending the flowers in the garden. Weird colours fill the sky, orange and purple and yellow and black. And with every bolt of lightning, everything changes as if by magic, lending to all objects an eerie phosphorescence.

A midsummer's dream.

***

What really happened? Any grade four pupil will explain it to you in simple, scientific language: electrical buildups, polarities, clashing fronts, temperature differentials.... But what happened three thousand years ago? A Canaanite farmer would have replied: "Thunder? That's the voice of Baal. Lightning? Those are Baal's arrows".
It's true, such a storm was probably widely interpreted as divine monologue. Surely that's how the faithful Israelite saw it. "The voice of Yahweh", they said, "is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, Yahweh, upon many waters" (Psalm 29:3). Of course, to them it was not Baal, as it was the Canaanites and many apostate Israelites.

Before I go into Psalm 29 as such, I should like to assess the meaning of "the voice of Baal" as it was supposedly heard by the average Canaanite. That should demonstrate the highly polemical nature of Psalm 29. After all, Psalm 29 is a confessional song, positing the fame of Yahweh over against the widely held notion that Baal was Lord of the land.

1. The voice of Baal.

To the Canaanite, the changing of the seasons brought life and death to the gods. Spring rains meant that the gods were alive and well; summer drought spelled disaster, not just for the farmer, but for his god as well. The Canaanite personified the elements and the seasons.

He believed that the rains, which normally fell between the end of October and April, were sent by Baal and his spouse, Astarte. Harvest was the fruit of his gods' sexual life. But during the remaining months, the climate is exceedingly dry and everything in the field is scorched. The Canaanite believed that Baal had died, having been vanquished by his arch-enemy, Moot, who was god of the intense heat and ripened grain. At the close of the rainy season, Mowot is reported to have said to Baal: "Take your clouds, your winds, your bucket and your rain, and retire to the underworld". Accordingly, Baal exercised no power during the summer months. The names of some of Baal's followers are indicative of his loss of power in summer, and undoubtedly reflect the hardships endured by the Baal devotees. The name Jezebel means: Where Lord? In the autumn, however, the warlike Astarte would vanquish Mowot and lead her spouse out of the underworld.
They would then resume their normal sexual activities, leading to the inevitable harvest.

This cult made an unbelievable impact on Canaanites and Israelites alike. This, of course, is partly explained by their constant need for rain during the "winter" months. Life depended on it. A fairly predictable and consistent rainy season was even more important to the farmer than a sizable rain fall (cf. Deuteronomy 28:12; Amos 4:7). Drought meant death. Accordingly, Baal- and Astarte-worship formed an important part of Canaanite agronomy.

One of the most offensive components of this religion was its "sacred coupling". If fertility was the result of divine sexual intercourse, why not encourage and reinforce these blessings by emulating the gods? This led to the infamous "sacred prostitution", repeatedly condemned in Scripture. The practise was not, however, confined to the Canaanite: "Yea, upon every high hill and under every green tree you bowed down as a harlot" (Jeremiah 2:20). Everyone had sexual relations with everyone else. The temples of Baal and Astarte were conveniently staffed with men and women who would allow themselves to be used for this "most holy sacrament" (cf. Deuteronomy 23:17; Ezekiel 16, 23; Hosea 2; I Kings 15:12; II Kings 9:22; Genesis-Exodus, ).

Sculpture formed part of this worship. There are statues and images of Astarte with exaggerated sex organs, further emphasized by suggestive hand movement. Hardly a house in Palestine has been excavated without the tell-tale evidence of this religion. Astarte was usually depicted with a snake, the symbol of fertility, around her neck, and a lily, showing her sex appeal, in her hand. Many of such artifacts have also been recovered from what were formerly Israelite homes, even though the images may be said to be less suggestive. Our day may be plagued with wide-spread pornographic literature, but in those days there was considerable pornographic sculpture.

Thunder was considered Baal's voice; the rains were his blessings. Archaeology has also uncovered images of Baal
holding a bolt of lightning in one hand and throwing out thunder with the other. It's on the basis of this and other suggestions that some believe Psalm 29 to have been a Baal psalm originally, later appropriated by Yahweh for His own purpose. If so, it would originally have read:

Ascribe to Baal, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to Baal glory and strength.
Ascribe to Baal the glory of his name;
worship Baal in holy array.
The voice of Baal is upon the waters;
the god of glory thunders,
Baal, upon many waters, etc.

The view is understandable. There were more which Yahweh's had appropriated from heathen religion (Genesis-Exodus, ). Linguistically, the names Yahab and Leviathan, which are used for Yahweh's praise, probably originated in the non-Israelite world (cf. Psalm 74:14, 87:4, 89:11; Isaiah 51:9). Furthermore, each word of Psalm 29, with the exception of the name "Yahweh" can be found in more ancient Canaanite texts. It is also true that Baal, or Hadad, was the god of rain and storm in the Canaanite world, and his praise was universally sung in Baal-"psalms". It is therefore all the more striking to have converted such a psalm into use by a religion which was really in a minority. It could be interpreted as a challenge to the dominant deity, which was Baal. It's as though the minority was saying to the majority: "No, no, it's not Baal whose voice is sounded over the waters, but Yahweh's". This would add to the polemical nature of the psalm, which I've mentioned earlier. However, without comparative Canaanite texts, it's impossible to conclude that Psalm 29 was originally dedicated to Baal. Whether Canaanite or otherwise in origin, Psalm 29 is highly confessional. The historical situation was this: the cult of Baal was enormously popular, and it took a good deal of raw courage to vocalize and publicize belief in another deity. The Psalm is therefore a confession of faith, proclaimed in contrast to the dominant religion, the spirit of the age, not merely among Canaanite people, but also among the majority of Israelites.
Psalm 29 is a psalm to the glory of Yahweh. In conclusion, we might describe the psalm's main thesis as follows: "The glory of God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as portrayed in a thunderstorm."

2. Psalm of the seven peals.

Seven times the voice of Yahweh spoke as thunder in the heavens. Remember that in ancient times thunder was thought to have this personification.

Verse 1:

Ascribe to Yahweh, 0 heavenly beings, ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.

God is glorious and strong. Man is called upon to confess that. Yet how many actually recognize God's sovereignty and power in a thunderstorm? There were many in Israel who, despite the reignant ideas about the elements, were not willing to worship Yahweh. They were the foolish and arrogant which were discussed earlier (cf. §4).

Whom does Yahweh call to worship? The original Hebrew has "sons of god" instead of "heavenly beings". Considering other passages of Scripture, "heavenly beings", or simply "angels" may be a correct rendition. Job 1:6: "Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them": These sons of God may together have formed a heavenly council, such as is alluded to in Psalm 89: "...a God feared in the council of the holy ones, great and terrible above all that are round about him" (verse8; cf. I Kings 22).

But "sons of god" may also have been kings and judges in the land, those who wielded power over the nation. An example of this may be found in Psalm 82: "I say 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like men, and fall like any prince'" (verses 6,7). This interpretation is also most likely in the case of Genesis 6:1-4 (cf. Leviticus, ).
I personally find the second translation -- sons of god as kings and judges -- most appealing. In that case, Psalm 29 called the kings of the land to recognize the glory and strength of Yahweh in a thunderstorm. While it is true that Yahweh loves to be praised by children, he requires this of the rich and powerful as well. Verse 2 shows how.

Verse 2:

Ascribe to Yahweh the glory of his name;
worship Yahweh in holy array.

Both Scripture and history have recorded the names of those who worshiped Yahweh (cf. II Chronicles 20). But Psalm 29 calls them to worship when He appears in His glory, such as in a thunderstorm. Verse 2 is sometimes translated, "Prostrate yourselves before Yahweh when he appears in holiness". It's a good translation; Yahweh comes to us in the holiness -- impressiveness -- of a thunderstorm and "speaks" to us in the sense that He displays His grandeur.

The grade four's explanation is true, of course, as far as it goes. A thunderstorm is partly a question of polarity, fronts, electrical charges and temperature differences. But if our knowledge of thunder does not go beyond the technical, scientistic level, we cannot understand the spirit of Psalm 29. The flashes of lightning and peals of thunder should also be seen as demonstrations of God's power. That's simply a question of interpreting the phenomena in two different, though not mutually exclusive or contradictory, ways. It's perfectly justifiable.

Verse 3:

The voice of Yahweh is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
Yahweh, upon many waters.

The reader should try to picture the gathering storm as it swept in from the Mediterranean Sea. In order to follow its course, we should outline the geography of Palestine briefly. To the north was Lebanon with its mighty cedars. To the east -- present day Jordan -- the Hermon or Sirion with its huge oak trees. To the south were grasslands, and, further south yet, the Negev desert. And farther to the west lay the wilderness or plain -- the Dead Sea, Jordan usually dry, an untraveled area -- of Kadesh towards where...
Thunderheads rising out of the Mediterranean must have been an awe-inspiring sight to the Israelite, particularly when we consider his fear of the mighty sea. And above the rising storm came the "voice" of Yahweh, echoing far and wide. Verse 3 writes about that echo.

Verse 4:

The voice of Yahweh is powerful,
the voice of Yahweh is full of majesty.

No one is so insensitive that he is not awed by the intensity of lightning and the magnificence of thunder. A god-fearing person, caught unprepared in the middle of an open field when lightning strikes all around him, may have a difficult time soothing his terror by saying, "Oh, it's only electricity..." He is more likely to think of the "voice" of Yahweh, and be astonished at his glory.

It's no wonder that Yahweh used the storm to impress friend and foe alike. He made use of it during Israel's exodus to confound the Egyptians (Exodus 9:23), during the proclamation of the Sinai covenant (Exodus 19), and when He helped Israel in its war against the Philistines (I Samuel 7:10).

Verse 5 and 6:

The voice of Yahweh breaks the cedars,
Yahweh breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

The storm moves north to Lebanon, renowned for its imposing cedars. The trunks of these trees often measured six or seven feet in diameter. The tree could easily soar to a hundred feet or more. Its foliage circumference could measure up to two hundred and fifty feet. Small wonder that they were considered the paragon of pride and majesty (Isaiah 2:13) But what does a primeval giant mean to Yahweh? He uproots them with the finger of his hand and flings them afield, to make them "skip like a calf".
Verse 6 also ridicules Mount Hermon, otherwise known as Sirion (Deuteronomy 3:9), the Canaanites' "holy mountain". The Lord makes Sirion jump "like a young wild ox", possibly in reference to the destruction, by storm, of pagan temples whose ruins have been found on Mount Hermon.

Verse 7 and 8:
The voice of Yahweh flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of Yahweh shakes the wilderness, Yahweh shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. Having poured out its wrath and fire over Mount Hermon, the storm moves north and spreads out over the Kadesh plains into the direction of the Orontes River. The Israelite had no love for empty wastelands and unsettled places such as the Kadesh region. To be caught out in the open, with no refuge in sight, was just as frightening and uncanny as seeing the storm lumber in from the forbidding Great Sea. The whole violent spectacle made him shudder and quake, because he knew that his God was visiting him.

Verse 9:
The voice of Yahweh makes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forests bare; and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

Seven times the voice of the Lord explodes forth in majestic and awe-inspiring violence. Then, all is quiet. Suddenly, the psalmist finds himself, as if transported by the hand of God, in the temple of Yahweh. Profoundly impressed by the voice of their God, the worshipers respond to the storm with their confessional "Glory". They know whence the storm comes and humbly pay their respects: Honour to whom honour is due!

***

The fact that the "voice of Yahweh" was mentioned seven times did not escape the Israelite either. The number seven was the symbolic number for the Sinai covenant, which was the basis also for Israel's calendar of holy days (Genesis—Exodus, Leviticus, ). The number served as reminder that it was indeed Yahweh, and not Baal, who spoke. The psalmist further
dispelled any fear of paganism in verses 10 and 11.

Verses 10:

Yahweh sits enthroned over the flood;
Yahweh sits enthroned as king for ever.

The Hebrew word used for "flood" is the same as that used for the Genesis flood, when it rained for forty days and nights until the waters rose to twenty-five feet above the highest mountain tops (Genesis 7:4, 12, 19ff.). Yahweh sits above that, meaning He also controls the floods and the storms (Genesis 8:1-3).

Verse 11:

May Yahweh give strength to his people!
May Yahweh bless his people with peace!

Psalm 29 ends with blessings of power and peace. The psalmist saw giant oaks and cedars truncated with little effort, saw the plains turn into an uncanny, luminous spectre, saw the sea and sky rise in monumental seeming anger.... The contrasting quiet after the storm has its own message to bring. The sky is a clear blue, not the moisture-laden, misty grey from before. The humidity is gone, replaced by a decidedly fresh, even fragrant, atmosphere. There is peace. The psalm may originally have been partly allegorical, referring to the peace mentioned by Isaiah, when cows and bears, lions and goats would lie down together (Isaiah 2:1-5, 11:1-10, 65:19), or possibly to the peace under Solomon, when men from Dan to Beersheba could dwell in peace (I Kings 4:25).

The psalm can teach modern readers the same thing, both about the nature of a storm and the peace which our heavenly Father has promised us. Its message is reminiscent of the proclamation made by the angels above the fields of Ephratha: "Glory to God in the highest," the beginning and middle of Psalm 29, "and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased", the conclusion.

3. Christianity infiltrated by cyclical religious ideas.

Psalm 29 establishes the linearity of history of past and future. As such, it comes into conflict
with cyclical concepts of religion and history which were current in ancient times and which, unfortunately, have been adopted by the mainstream of Christianity. In ancient times, everything happened according to a cycle without a discernible future. Gods died and rose again. Harvests, rains, droughts and famines came and went with predictable regularity. Baal worship in Tyre, Sidon, Babel and Egypt was especially susceptible to these cyclical versions of religion and history. Psalm 29 clearly breaks with this and looks ahead to a future peace. The psalm is entirely consistent with the prophetic nature of the other books of Scripture.

Western Christianity has failed to root out cyclical concepts. During its early missionary efforts, the church saw fit to incorporate many pagan traditions in order to make its own message more palatable.

Early western man lived in terror of the oncoming winter. They were never sure whether the sun god would triumph in his never-ending struggle against darkness. Then, towards the end of December, days grew longer again, and hope was rekindled. Primitive man would celebrate the feast of Midwinter by giving each other presents, depicting evergreen trees—green was the symbol of life—and eating cakes in the form of the sun's perimeter. Ancient Rome also celebrated the "resurrection" of the sun, the Sol invictus. The future was secure, at least until days began to shorten again.

Unfortunately, the church has baptized many of the ingredients of pagan worship and fertility rites. The ideas of cyclical religion can be clearly seen in the church's calendar. The terminology of Midwinter gave way to Christmas, but the idea is all too often the same. The church now has its "Advent", during which people prepare for the birth of the Christ. Many churches also observe Lent, a period of six weeks preceding Good Friday, as if Christ has to suffer each year anew. The remainder of the year, it should also be observed, is remarkably free of "divine intervention"! The period between Pentecost and Advent, corresponding to the summer and harvest months,
is that of the Spirit, who brings the fruits of the victory achieved by Christ. But in the fall, the struggle is renewed, each year again. The Reformation fought a desperate fight against these pagan influences, but the outcome was not encouraging. 22

Scripture knows no such cyclical religion. In contrast to Baal, who died each year, our Yahweh is a living god. Christ came to bring His sacrifice only once: "I died, and behold, I am alive for evermore" (Revelation 1:17ff.). The prophets did not prophesy about a never-ending, repetitious cycle; they pointed towards the future. The apostles also proclaimed about the future. In both instances, they spoke of the future of Jesus Christ, our Lord.
There are some people who are never ill. They have never had to consult a doctor or go to a hospital. David, the probable author of Psalm 30, was such a man. Or at least, so we are led to believe. He had the constitution of a soldier, and, although he had undoubtedly experienced death and illness in the family, few were the times he had to intercede with Yahweh for his own health and welfare.

But then it happened. He became deathly ill. His wives and children, his entire household in fact, felt that he was near to death. And it is likely that all who loved David prayed fervently for him then. Also David, of course, although he had never had to pray for his health before. David knew that only Yahweh could provide escape from death (Psalm 68:20).

One night, it seemed that he would not make it. Everyone kept vigil. They either prayed or worked, but did not sleep. The crisis came... and passed. The prayers had been heard, and David was on his way to recovery. That's what Psalm 30 is about.

God himself has thought so highly of this psalm that He included it in the canon. It can tell us what and how we should pray when we become afflicted; it can also tell us what our respond should be in the event God grants us recovery and further life among the living.

1. The inscription.

I have no difficulty with crediting the psalm to David, as the inscription reads. But the phrase "at the dedication of the Temple" is a riddle. It is not unlikely, however, that the temple mentioned is really the palace which David was building for himself (II Samuel 5:11). During its construction David was struck down by a severe illness, and it did not appear as though he was going to be able to finish it.
But Yahweh spared his life, and David may have composed this poem to be used at the dedication of his palace.

2. **I will extol thee.**

Psalm 30 is David's jubilant praise to Yahweh for sparing his life. It's been said that there is nothing like a serious illness to teach appreciation for life's abundant goodness. But David's primary concern was to express his appreciation for the goodness of God, which he may well have forgotten on occasion. The central theme of the psalm is not so much God's healing power or life's fulness, but God's praise. That's how the psalm begins and ends.

**Verse 1:**

*I will extol thee, Yahweh, for thou hast drawn me up, and hast not let my foes rejoice over me.*

Usually, if a patient is successfully discharged from the hospital, after a long and serious illness, he will extol the virtues of his doctors and nurses. There is nothing wrong with that. Only David extolled the virtues of his God, because, of course, he knew that it was Yahweh who had rescued him from the pit. He didn't say, "Boy, was I lucky, but I made it!" or, "If it hadn't been for doctor So-and-so, I'd have been gone by now!" The latter is true, of course, because our Creator uses the medical means and qualified doctors and nurses at His disposal. Only, we should not leave it at that. As David knew, so we ought to know that it is God who makes the treatment efficacious, and He is the one who should be extolled. That should be our confession of faith, as it was David's.

***

The second line of verse 1 reads: "...and hast not let my foes rejoice over me". There were undoubtedly many who would have profited from David's death. There were kings whom David had defeated and subjugated. There were political opponents, conspirators, wicked judges, and a host of others who would have rejoiced at his demise.
The plural "foes" may also allude to the Great Enemy, Death, and the host of Satan. Modern man has forgotten to speak that concretely about Death, but it may well be what David meant. In any event, I believe that either interpretation is permissible, because both situations were real.

Verse 2:

Yahweh my God, I cried to thee for help, and thou hast healed me.

David knew that only Yahweh could help him, because He was the giver of life, and only He could restore life. Did David then belittle and ridicule the efforts of doctors and the science of medicine. Would he have pooh-poohed or condemned modern medicinal and pharmaceutica methods and supplies? It's not likely, but he did know that all means needed the blessing of Yahweh.

David's distant heirs did not always follow his example. Asa, for instance, though he had once relied upon Yahweh, declined to call upon Him, even though he knew he was terminally ill: "yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but sought help from physicians" (II Chronicles 16:12).

Verse 3:

Yahweh, thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life among those gone down to the Pit.

If someone is hospitalized with a serious ailment, let's say a heart attack, and the hospital staff succeeds in keeping him alive artificially, we say, "Well, he's still alive". Only when brain waves are no longer recorded is he pronounced dead. Death, as most of us know, is largely a question of definitions in hospital circles. So it is with Psalm 30, and that psalm has its own definition. After all, Psalm 30 has David returning from death!

According to current definitions, probably not. We must not forget, however, that Psalm 30 is not about
medical terminology or modern definitions. Psalm 30, like all the others, is time-bound. In order to understand it, we must make an effort to understand attitudes and terminology of the time. We must place the psalm in the historical situation, of which I also spoke earlier. To Moses and other Israelites, life was not simply breathing, heartbeats and brain waves, but included the whole scope of life, wife and children, land and cattle, vineyard and olive grove. Life meant that everything was well; life was existence which had been abundantly blessed by Yahweh through the covenant.

In other words, death could come before actual dying. Death could come with Yahweh's curse. Death could be synonymous with hopelessness. Death could strike in the form of terrible disasters, from which there could, humbly speaking, be no recovery. Death was the absence of blessing.

Quite understandably, the psalm does not distinguish sharply between being grievously ill and dying. A person who is hospitalized with what he has been told may be a terminal illness, is already in the "grip of death". We would agree with that. Similarly, a person who has suddenly become severely handicapped by an accident, and who can no longer "live" as he was used to, may be sorely tempted to give up all hope, thereby falling more and more under the influence of death's power. The Israelites were probably right: death cannot be narrowly defined. Death does not play according to prescribed rules. It does not recognize fixed boundaries but often flows freely over "the land of the living". We imply agreement with that view with expressions like "having one foot in the grave" or "being at death's door", suggesting the powerful magnetic pull of whatever is behind that door. But David experienced himself being "brought up from Sheol"; he knew that Sheol could not be confined to the grave.

When he was so seriously ill, he no longer felt he among the living, his wife and children, his subjects and his court. One translation of verse 3 reads: "O Yahweh, you lifted me from Sheol, you restored me to life, as I was descending the Pit."
Being deathly ill is not "living". Those who have experienced long periods of convalescence or crippling diseases can sympathize with that. My wife and I were in an automobile accident once, which was so serious that we had thought our time had come. And ever since that time, thinking about it makes me feel that "someone is walking over my grave".

Such "narrow escapes" can give new dimensions to a person's gratitude. Having experienced such confrontations with death, a person can well understand why Scripture should speak of "returning from death" instead of healing.

Verse 4:
Sing praises to Yahweh, 0 you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name.

Psalm 30 is not only confessional, it is also instructional. David and the faithful of Israel did not merely call upon God for deliverance, but they brought Him their thanks as well. They attributed David's recovery to His name, thereby bringing still greater glory to Yahweh.

The tradition is known to our churches also. When someone, who has been ill for a long time, returns to take his place among the "living", the congregation is usually asked to remember him and the Lord's mercy in its thanksgiving.

Verse 5a:
For his anger is but for a moment, and his favour is for alifetime.

This verse is not easy to interpret. One thing appears to be sure, however: David was subjected to the anger of God. But why? David had undoubtedly forgotten Yahweh on occasion, but was that sufficient reason for God to bring him to the brink of death? Was God's anger in this instance intended as a lesson for David? It's possible that God wanted to show David just how much He hates sin. It may be that David had forgotten the seriousness of sin, and was therefore confronted with the ultimate wages of sin, death. "The wages of sin is death", said the apostle (Romans 6:23). It could not have
been easy for David to lie at death's door, suddenly realizing the sum total of all his iniquities. What was he afraid of? Death? Or was he struck by the sudden fear of an angry God visiting him with His curse? Or was he suddenly humbled by the awareness that he, as child of God, had sinned grievously against his Father? Whichever of these it was, there is little doubt that David was deeply impressed by his own misery.

Fortunately, God's wrath, in this instance, was not the dominant theme of his psalm. David also knew that, as child of God, he could safely rely on his Father's compassion, described in Lamentations: "For the Lord will not cast off for ever, but, although he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men" (3:3-33 Hosea 11:8; Joel 2:13). Besides, to whom has He given power over death for our deliverance?

The illness itself was but a passing reminder, followed by a lifetime of favour. Let's not forget, though, that this is the confession of a man who has had to endure misery for most of his life! For David to come back time and again to extol Yahweh's lasting favour is remarkable.15

In verse 5b he returned briefly to "that night", when his life hung by a thread.

Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

The news, after the long night of suspenseful waiting and incessant praying, is good, to the great delight of his loyal subjects, but the chagrin of his opponents. David now goes on to explain that the illness has been good for him, that it has purged him of his indolent "prosperity".

Verse 6:

As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved".

Complacency and arrogance are two very pervasive enemies, particularly when things have gone well. Most of us, who have been healthy and hale throughout our lives, are tempted to
ask, "What can happen to me?" We're not afraid of heart attacks, diabetes or car accidents, because we secretly do not believe they will befall us. That's for someone else, we say.\(^\text{16}\)

David probably often felt that. He had not entirely forgotten Yahweh, of course, but he had become king, had erected his own palace, had defeated his enemies, and, through it all, he had gained a measure of self-assurance. He may not have been completely free from complacency.

Verse 7:

By thy favour, O Yahweh,
thou hadst established me as a strong mountain;\(^\text{17}\)
thou didst hide thy face,
I was dismayed.

David may have meant mount Zion, or Jerusalem, which David had only just captured and in which he had built his palace (II Samuel 5:6ff., 5:11.\(^\text{18}\)). That time had indeed been a time of prosperity for David, as recorded by Samuel: "And David perceived that the Lord had established him king over Israel, and that he had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel" (II Samuel 5:12).

After his illness, David acknowledged that he had not been as aware of his need for Yahweh as he had been earlier. His prosperity had lulled into false security. His illness became a very painful reminder to him that God can withhold His favour. He is not obliged to grant us His favour either. We can also sometimes be reminded not to "rest on our laurels" or take His favour for granted. Our own health is not a product of good medical and dietary care; not in first instance, at any rate. Even David had to be reminded of that.
And then David's world seemed all at once to fall into ruin. And what of his plans to complete his beautiful palace? What, moreover, of his plans to build a temple for Yahweh? All his hopes and anticipations seemed suddenly to disappear through the yawning jaws of death. "Light is sweet," said the Preacher, "and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun" (11:7). But there seemed to be no more of that for David. He was about to die. And suddenly, he was gripped by the fear of death, as recorded in verse 7: "thou didst hide thy face, I was dismayed". In other words, even an astute believer like David, was petrified! For only a short while, the Lord withdrew His hand from David and he became paralyzed with fear. Was it to teach David a lesson?

If it was a lesson, it is still operative today. Feelings of independence are part of everyone's nature. We all aspire, at one time or another, to hopes of autonomy; we all sometimes feel that we can fend for ourselves. And there's nothing our God would rather see than for us to humble ourselves before Him and seek our refuge only in Him.

Verse 8:

To thee, O Yahweh, I cried;
and to the Lord I made supplication.

To whom did David turn? He turned to Yahweh, or Adonai, Lord, in 8b, the Sovereign Ruler, who exercises control over all the universe and all life. He did not turn, as Asa later would, to the physicians. Or is it possible that things had already gone too far for that? In any case, David asks Yahweh for his grace.

***
How did David make his supplication. That's an interesting question, because when we read the subsequent verses, it becomes plain that the supplication almost becomes a "negotiation". Like Heman (Psalm 88) and Hezekiah (Isaiah 38), David presented the Lord with some good reasons why he should not die. They did not prostrate themselves as though addressing a strange, unknown and remote deity. They were addressing their heavenly Father, to whom they felt they could go to discuss their problems. And they convinced the Lord!

Among other things, this shows how greatly God esteems man, His creation. Man is the only creature bearing His image / endowed with rational facility. Furthermore, God himself has elevated people of His choice to great heights through His covenant of grace fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As such, He has given us "input" into His affairs. Are His affairs not our affairs as well? Listen to the convincing tenor of verse 9:

19 What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise thee? 20 Will it tell of thy faithfulness?

Does this sound too pretentious? But then, let's keep in mind why God created man: to honour and glorify Him; to love and serve Him; to obey and work for Him. Animals are not capable of that. They cannot love, or think, or consciously serve. The dead can no longer praise Him. Those who have deserted the covenant have chosen not to serve Him. Under those circumstances, David's arguments do not seem unreasonable. He wanted the opportunity to go on worshiping Yahweh and leading the nation in the path of righteousness. God of course knew that
and answered his prayer.

Let's look at his prayer more closely. What did David ask for? Did he ask for long life? Victory over his enemies? Did he pray, "Save my life, so that I can remove the high places and end Baal worship"? No, his sole concern was that if he were to die, there would be one less mouth to sing the praises of Yahweh. David's only argument is the glory of Yahweh. David knew: "The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence." But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and for evermore" (Psalm 115:17,18). "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord" (Psalm 118:17). "Let me live that I may praise thee...." (Psalm 119:175). "The living, the living, he thanks thee...." (Isaiah 38:19). Life and praise is really one and the same. It's as though life without praise does not deserve to be called life. In fact, people who have turned away from God and have chosen instead to live for themselves and for their own glory, are busy destroying the very essence of life as it was created and intended by God. The message of the psalms is this: life only exists where there is abundant praise for Yahweh.

This was David's fundamental confession. It should no less be ours, even those who feel with Moses: "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent..., but I am slow of speech and of tongue" (Exodus 4:10). Our God is not unreasonable; He will not expect us to perform beyond our endowed abilities, but we should not sell our own talents short either. Note his reply to Moses: "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11). We should also remember that if we never bring his praise in public, we cannot very well appeal to the principal
argument used by David!

We can also not use David's argument if we undermine the meaning of the psalm by suggesting the psalm is too "anthropomorphic". There has always been much talk among christians about what is anthropomorphic in the Bible, and what is not. In Genesis-Exodus, the author has explained why we cannot agree with this tendency to hyper-allegorize many revelations in Scripture. Anthropomorphising Psalm 30 would rob it of its instructional character. It denudes the psalm, forcing us to look deeper for other meanings which in all probability don't exist. The end of the matter would be that, even if we succeeded in "finding" another meaning, we would probably not be able to apply it to our lives!

Verse 10,11,12:

Hear, O Yahweh, and be gracious to me!
O Yahweh, be thou my helper!
Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing;
thou hast loosed my sackcloth
and girded me with gladness,
that my soul may praise thee and not be silent.
O Yahweh my God, I will give thanks to thee
for ever.

The other heresy which prevents us from understanding Psalm 30 is the Gnostic belief in the immortal soul, according to which believers are not dead, but continue to exist as bodiless "souls" before their Maker. What, then, is the point of appealing to God for one's life, as David so fervently did? It can't be solely for God's praise, because he could presumably praise God before His throne as well. If the Gnostic concept of the immortal soul is maintained, Psalm 30 might just as well be deleted from Scripture, at least as far as its meaning is concerned. 25
Of course, the Old Testament believer did indeed look beyond the grave, as we learned from Psalm 16, also Davidic, and from our discussions in chapters 8,4,5.

Verse 10,11,12:

Hear, 0 Yahweh, and be gracious to me!  
O Yahweh, be thou my helper!  
Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing;  
thou hast loosed my sackcloth  
and girded me with gladness,  
that my soul may praise thee and not be silent.  
O Yahweh my God, I will give thanks to thee for ever.

We don't know exactly what Israelites were accustomed to wear during periods of mourning, though it is very likely that the habit was very simple. Probably it was a cloak of camel hair or goat hair known as a sackcloth. Usually, it was the only piece of clothing worn (Genesis 37:34; II Samuel 3:31; II Kings 6:30, 19:1; IKings 20:21, 21:27; Isaiah 15:3, 22:12, 37:1, 20:2ff.; Jeremiah 4:8, 6:26, 48:37; Ezechiel 7:18). It's also likely that everyone in the palace, and possibly beyond, had attired themselves in this fashion, and were dejectedly awaiting the final verdict.

But then came the reversal! And with the reversal, the mood at the court changed abruptly. Singing was heard once again, and David himself went forth in dance. Unusual? Not at all; it was a typically human reaction, carried out to the glory of God.

***

Did David fall back into complacency brought on by prosperity? Did he quickly forget his earlier predicament? Did he slip back into the rut? His last word stands as a pledge: "I will give thee thanks for ever". He would not, according to his vow, slip back into his former smugness. He would
henceforth praise the Lord. Seemingly, the Lord had succumbed to David's convincing reasoning, but it meant that the Lord would hold him to his promise.

But David was true to his word. He has left believers of all ages with many beautiful confessional psalms. He was, it is true, inspired by the Holy Spirit, but that should not detract from the fact that he worked hard in God's kingdom, both in committing his experiences to writing and in his care for the temple service (I Chronicles 25, 28).

***

The praise of Yahweh forms the conclusion of Psalm 30. That was the reason for his recovery. That was his *raison d'être*. How many psalms owe their existence to David's recovery?

While we cannot emulate David to the extent of composing canonical psalms, we are called upon to discover their meaning for our own lives and use them as vehicles for our own praise of God.

Have some of us had a similar experience in life? What was our reaction? To whom did we give the credit? Publicly? It may be worthwhile to remember that if we never praise the Lord openly when we are well, or "in our prosperity", as the psalm has it, we can hardly expect to use David's pleas when things go wrong...

May the Spirit move us to recognize God's favour in our lives, and may we respond as David did so long ago: "O Yahweh my God, I will give thee thanks for ever", at home and among His people.
Psalms 42 and 43 were composed by the sons of Korah. The sons of Korah were of the Levitical order, members of the priesthood in Israel. Psalms 42 and 43 were probably written by one of those Korah Levites living far away from the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. His "exile", whether forced or self-imposed, is reflected in his yearning for the worship service of the Lord.

The psalms speak of yearning for true worship and distaste for the idol worship of heathens. The psalms are full of suffering and anguish. They express genuine pain and sorrow at having to live in total isolation, far removed from the community of the Lord worshiping in unison.

The psalmist also relied on Yahweh for deliverance. He pointed the way through the gloom to God's reassuring promises. Psalm 42/3 --I'll refer to them as one psalm henceforth-- is an instructional psalm, a maskil.

1. An instruction of the Korah Levites.

We can see from Korah and his descendants that a wicked father can have god-fearing children. Korah was a descendant of Levi, and therefore of the Levitical order. Together with Dathan and Abiram, Korah rebelled against Moses. As punishment, the ground swallowed the rebels up, but the sons of Korah did not die (Numbers 16; Numbers-Deuteronomy; Numbers 26:10ff.). They heeded Moses' warning and removed themselves from their fathers presence and did not participate in the revolt.

Toward the end of his reign, David commissioned the Korah Levites to assume responsibility for
the choral part of the temple liturgy (I Chronicles 6:31; II Chronicles 20:19). In all probability, they did not limit themselves to psalms which were extant, but composed many themselves.\footnote{The inscription "of the Sons of Korah" can also be found above Psalms 44-49, 84, 85, 87 and 88.}

One of them must have composed 42/43. In verse 4, alludes to his leading function in the temple worship. He apparently led the throngs of pilgrims into the temple, all the while singing and praising the Lord. But whether he was a lyricist, soloist or choralist, he clearly thought very highly of his role in the temple worship. Notice how Israelites in general felt about the temple: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!" (Psalm 137:5). And if the ordinary Israelite felt this way, think of how a priest or Levite must have felt about their official function! They were people who virtually lived in the temple of their God. "Blessed are those who dwell in thy house, ever singing thy praise" (Psalm 84:4), even at night during the evening sacrifice (Psalm 134:1).

At the moment of writing, however, the Levite is a long way from Jerusalem. He is in the North, near mount Hermon and the headwaters of the Jordan River. The terrain is beautiful but wild. In spring, the rivers are swollen with the melting snow from Hermon. White water and waterfalls are everywhere. "Deep calls to deep at the thunder of thy cataracts; all thy waves and thy billows have gone over me" (verse 7). The poet uses the imagery of the falls and rapids to highlight the trials he has endured for Yahweh.
What was troubling the poor man? He was suffering from homesickness, there's little doubt about that. But why? What had happened to him? How did he get here? Was he an exile? A prisoner of war? Had he been kidnapped? Was he a refugee? Was he ill, and convalescing in the mountains? We don't really know; but we do know one thing: he was unable to go to the temple, and that, for a Levite, was a disaster!

All he could think of was "God's face, the festive throng, God's holy mountain, His altar". That must have been a depressing time for him, particularly in view of the fact that he lived among men who continually harassed and ridiculed him about his God!

Can you place yourself in his position? If so, this maskil can give invaluable instruction today. Such maskils throw the prophetic light of God's Word into our current situations. This particular one is a model prayer for those who find themselves in similar circumstances.

Psalm 42/3 can be divided into three parts:

a) Psalm 42:1-5;
b) Psalm 42:6-11;
c) Psalm 43:1-5.

All three parts have the same refrain. Further division would serve no purpose.

It is too much of an emotional reaction of someone who has been cast into despair to warrant further analysis. It records the experiences of a man whose trials have smothered him like giant breakers on the seashore. There were times when his troubles choked him so that he could go no further. For that reason also, the psalm may be said to contain not only words, but also pregnant pauses, periods of painful silence.
2. Homesickness and scorn, but also hope.

He was deeply pained by his yearning. Somewhere he had seen a deer standing beside a dried-up stream (Jeremiah 14:5; Joel 1:20). The disappointed animal had cried out its anguish. The inevitable result would be death. And the Levite identified himself with the poor beast and felt the ominous hand of death upon him!

Verse 1:
As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God.

The Levite should not be seen as an excentric, or as the forerunner of the mediaeval mystic. The temptation might be there, considering his frequent use of the term "soul". It's certain he was not referring to some small, confined area of his existence, some nebulous "inner space", which was ostensibly directed to some "mystical union" with God. That was definitely not the case.

Such a "soul" was the creation of the self-willed religion of men like Eckart, Tauler, Ruysbroeck, Seuse and Thomas à Kempis. This "mystical union" was an invention of the Middle Ages, not of the Old Testament Israelite. "Mystical union" was directed to pleasing and gratifying the self, and was not based on praise for God through His covenantal ties.

In fact, the Levite was the direct opposite of this mediaeval fallacy. To him, the "soul" was not an "immortal entity", borrowed from Greek philosophy, nor was it the mediaeval fantasy of a moral-spiritual dimension within man, which, by the way, has stubbornly persisted to our time; the Levite's "soul" was himself, his total being.
We should have nothing to do with either the Greek-Gnostic concept of soul, or with its mediaeval
derivative. Of course, much of mediaeval soul rapture
was directed in first instance against the Roman church,
which had pretty well deified its external worship
and had imposed the priesthood between God and the
believer. But mysticists went to the other extreme.
In its zeal for "mystical union" and "direct fellowship
of the soul with God", mysticism tossed out all of
what they considered to be "externals", including the
sacraments and the covenant. Where they allowed for
sacraments, it was only "to get people in the mood"
for the real thing, the "intimate communion of the
Bridegroom Jesus with His bride, the human soul"!
But the Levite would have had none of that!

The Levite thirsted for the Word, for the pro-
clamation and dispensation of God's Word! Not for
rapture, or some other spiritual guesswork. This is
clear from verse 2:

My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?

He is not yearning for vague generalities,
for rapturous union with God, or going to heaven "to
gaze and gaze of God". He had all the communion he
needed in prayer. His true longing is for God's house.
"Beholding the face of God", to the Sinai-bred Israelite,
was going to the temple to worship, to beg for forgive-
ness and receive God's blessings! It was to go to the
holies during the three great feasts (Exodus 23:17, 34:23; Isaiah 1:12; Deuteronomy 16:16). Yahweh lived
above the cherubim, did He not? To behold God was to
stand in the temple court "before His face" (I Samuel 2:30).

The Levite may have been in daily contact with
the stupid, stoney stares of pagan idols. They were
impotent fabrications, unable to understand or relieve
someone's misery (Psalm 115, 135). This must undoubtedly have intensified his desire for Yahweh, the living God. "When will I be allowed to see Yahweh again? Will I ever again be able to enter His house? When shall I taste again the pure worship of my God, and be able to lead my countrymen in praise? I thirst for that as a deer thirsts for running water."

***

Like the Korah Levite, David had also longed for the temple service. When he was forced to flee from Saul, leaving wife, friends and work behind, he did not complain about the evil which had befallen him. He only complained that his enemies "had driven him out this day that he should have no share in the heritage of the Lord, saying, 'Go, serve other gods'" (I Samuel 26:19), and prayed: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple" (Psalm 27:4).

But our Lord Jesus Christ is the best example of suffering and yearning. For six weeks, he was abandoned to the wiles of the devil, far away from His Father's house, in the inhospitable wilds. However, He fulfilled the experiences of this psalm also; His suffering and yearning represented the apex of all human suffering, and thus He fulfilled the psalm (cf. § 2, 2: how psalms can be fulfilled).

***

We no longer have holy places. Jerusalem is a holy city no longer. Palestine is not a holy land and our churches are not holy temples. There are no holy relics from the past. That time, if not forgotten, is certainly beyond our reach.
past. The Law's requirements for the holy place, the priesthood and the altars are no longer in effect (Hebrews 8). While their substance may remain in spirit, their form has been superceded by the sacraments of baptism and communion, and also the community of believers in the Word in whose midst lives the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:21ff.; I Corinthians 3:16). The substance of Psalm 42/3, therefore, remains:

the yearning of God's people for God's Word-and worship-service in the community of believers. Many New Testament believers, embattled by the spirit of unbelief, ridiculed by the scorn of the apostate, continue to look to this psalm for insight and deliverance. The ill and convalescing, prisoners, sea-farers and the aged....

But there is another aspect to this. Believers can long for God's worship service in times when the churches no longer proclaim the complete Word of God (I Samuel 3:1). There may be no shortage of beautiful, comfortable church buildings, but the sound proclamation of the Word may have been compromised. In its place may appear dead orthodoxy, sterile dogmas or superficial horizontalism. The Jews already reduced the meaning of the coming Christ to the political level. They had come to expect a political messiah, a revolutionary hero of the resistance. And when He finally came to "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21), it wasn't good enough.

For a while the people of God may be led astray by such heresies. In the long run, however, the Lord himself will re-focus the issues, until His people will once again begin to long for the true proclamation and dispensation of His Word.

Verse 3:
Verse 3:

My tears have been my food
day and night,
while men say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"

To the pagan, gods could only have territorial, not universal, claims. They probably viewed Yahweh as such a territorial deity with no jurisdiction beyond the borders of Israel. Accordingly, they proceeded to harass and ridicule the Levite: "So, what has become of your God? Why doesn't he help you? Isn't it about time you faced the facts?" We should keep in mind that many a heathen knew Yahweh as the God of the Israelites (Numbers 14:15; Joshua 2:9-11; I Samuel 4:8), and were not prepared to let the Israelites forget it in times of distress.

***

Where is your God? It's not likely that we come to hear that nowadays. After all, in many areas, religion now has an aura of respectability. Such a question would not be in good taste. Nevertheless, is it not implicit in many of the activities we see around us?

Do we not live in a world full of wickedness? It doesn't really matter what you read, hear or see, nearly everything has been permeated with the doctrines of the French Revolution: "non dieu, non maitre!" And whether the scorn of God and His Word is overt and strident, or whether it is cloaked by sophisticated innuendo, it is there nevertheless. Does God really exist? Is God not dead? Is God not an invention of a primitive, fearful mind? Is religion not the opiate of the masses? How can the Bible be a Book of Truth? Is it not always in conflict with natural science? How can a steel ax float? Is the account of the flood not a highly exaggerated projection of a local happening? How can the Bible be applicable? Is the resurrection of Jesus not a myth, brilliant, but nevertheless a myth?
Those are some of the current ideas found in contemporary christendom. In no way do any of these pretentious questions attempt to do justice to the God of Scripture. Where, in their theorizing, is the God of the great Flood, who called Abraham and redeemed Israel from Egypt, who forced water from the rocks and split the seas, who rained bread from heaven and raised up the dead, who raised up nations and humbled nations, who made a lasting covenant with Abraham and then with Israel at Sinai, who sent His Son and then His Spirit to effect our redemption? Where, in their ideas, is there room for the God who raised up His Son from the dead, sent Paul throughout Europe to raise up from among the Gentiles a nation unto the Lord?

Let's be clear about one thing at least: while we may not hear much explicit criticism from anyone, the spirit of our times has been thoroughly corrupted.

Verse 4:

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Verse 4 illustrates once again what the psalmist really missed: the crowd of pilgrims, singing God's praise in the temple, and worshiping with the congregation. The Levite was used to being "in the thick of it". He would not have understood the mystics' search for solitude and quiet meditation, for a meeting of the minds with God, for an inner experience or an inner light. The Levite's way to salvation led him through the busy, communal worship-service, including the sacraments and faith.

In the meantime, he is still far away from his ideal. He is still confined to the wilds, inhabited
by monstrous idols and their obscene slaves. So, again his yearning gets the better of him and he relapses into mourning. "These things I remember", he moans, because he cannot fight down the feeling of bitter loneliness and utter emptiness....

***

The Levite was not the last to have been subjected to that loneliness. I have already noted how Jeremiah commemorated his fortieth anniversary as prophet of the Most High at the bottom of a cistern. His heart must have gone out to the days of Josiah when, as a young Levite from Anathot, he witnessed the reformation under that god-fearing king (Isaiah 38). Did he perhaps know Psalm 42/43?

There was also Daniel, his three friends, Ezekiel, and the entire Remnant shuttled away to distant corners of the globe. Did they know Psalm 42/43? Similar in certain respects is Psalm 137, sung by the exiles during their captivity: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres....How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!"

New Testament history, too, has had its exiles and outcasts, from apostolic times to the present. We only need to recall Acts 8:1, John 16:2 and I John 3:11-17. Beyond apostolic days there were the Waldensians, driven from their homes by a zealous but erring church. Others fled, from Holland, from England and Scotland, from France and countless other places.

Verse 5:
Verse 5:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Between these lines is the confession of Psalm 34:18: "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (cf. Psalm 51:17).

Suddenly, the psalmist takes heart again!

He may have been consumed by a passion for the temple of his God, he may also have felt deeply offended by the scorn heaped on him and his God by the pagans around him, but he never doubted God's Word. Though plunged into deep despair, he remained faithful to Yahweh and continued to trust His promises. Yahweh was still his "help", his redeemer.

It's obvious that he was having a fairly difficult time of it. It appears he just could not succeed in fighting down his homesickness and indignation. The monologue shows the conflict which was raging within him.

But he admonished himself, because, of course, he knew better: "Hope in God; He's not going to let you down; this exile and pain is only temporary; within a short time now, He'll return you to His holy temple". Thus ends the first of three parts of Psalm 42/3.

Was this the end of his problems? Had he successfully conquered his dismay? One would think so, but the waves of worry roll back over him again, and again he becomes distraught.

Verse 6:

My soul is cast down within me,
therefore I remember thee,
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.
Once again, /his emotions get the better of him! And the motivation is the same as: an irrepressible longing for God's Word, His service, house and people. That is why I think that the psalm is a truly instructional one. It teaches us, among other things, that even the most devout can succumb to periods of depression, even repeated periods. One minute he sings, "Why are you cast down, my soul?" and the next he laments: "My soul is cast down". Does this conform to our concept of a staid and stable believer, who has conquered his fears and dismissed his anxieties? Isn't this rather the picture of who can't possibly be sure where he's going? But then, why shouldn't repeatedly bemoan his fate? Look what he was missing, after all....

Verse 7:

Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of thy cataracts;
all thy waves and thy billows
have gone over me.

The landscape is not very inspiring: majestic but lonely mountains and rushing cascades of icy water. Such scenes are often considered strikingly beautiful..., if the conditions are right. But to one accustomed to the plains, a forced exile in the mountains can be depressing and positively claustrophobic.

But again he revives!

Verse 8:

By day Yahweh commands his steadfast love;
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

While the Levite may not be able to discharge his temple duties for the time being, he does not discharge himself of his calling, which is to praise Yahweh. He continues to place his trust in Yahweh, and sings His praises day and night.
Verse 9:

I say to God, my rock;
"Why hast thou forgotten me?
Why go I mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?

It's tempting to consider verse 9 strictly from a human point of view. The poet, however, kept focussing on God's hand, which is why he kept asking, "Why?" (cf. Amos 3:6). He felt God's waves and billows overwhelming him, in the form of the catcalls and blasphemous innuendo inflicted on him by the pagans, but why, he wondered, should this happen to him?

Does this line of questioning God's acts trouble us? Should he perhaps have said, as we so often do, "Not my will, but thine be done? Who am I, after all, to question the deeds of the Almighty?" Frequently, however, this attitude reflects a resignation which is foreign to God's dealings with His people. In fact, it is closer to ancient Greek beliefs in the omnipotent force of "blind Necessity". If a Greek endured suffering, he could turn to his supreme deity, Zeus, but ultimately the matter was not in Zeus' hands. Zeus was really powerless in the face of Necessity, which transcended the power of the gods, and ruled the history of man and shaped his destiny. Such is not the case with God, although we sometimes speak of the Will of God as though it transcended God himself. In that case, the Will of God becomes analogous to the Greek idea of Necessity. It's true that our Lord Jesus also prayed, "Thy will be done", but by that time it had become crystal clear that there was no other way. There just was no alternative to His suffering. And yet, He also prayed, "If it's possible, let this cup pass from me".

Unfortunately, we often resign ourselves to our condition because of the presupposition that our suffering is inevitable, anyway. We pray, "Thy will be done", before we can be sure whether it is, in fact,
the will of God. Let's put it simply: if we suffer, do we conclude that it must be God's will and resign ourselves to it? Or do we seek a purpose to our suffering? Is God perhaps stimulating us to greater praise? Does He perhaps want us to humble ourselves, and fervently, faithfully pray to an end to the suffering? It may well be that some of us lack the faith to really pray efficaciously, because we have yielded to the inevitable! Isn't it possible that God in some instances is saying to us, "No, I don't want you to say 'Thy will be done', because it's not My will that you should suffer; it's My will that you look for the purpose of My will...Don't give up; I'm not made of stone. Let's see your faith in action. Have the faith to change My will!" 18

Just like the authors of Psalms 30 and 88 (cf. Psalm 30:10 and § 11), the poet knew that God's people come to Him as children, not as slaves. And children may well come to their father to ask,"Why are you doing this, Father?"

Verse 10:

As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"

As I said earlier, religion has become too "respectable" to draw open, vicious attacks. The attacks on God are therefore more subtle and sophisticated. There were times when assaults on religion were strident and sustained, like in the case of our Levite. Today, it's much more sinister, because, while cloaked by a degree of tolerance and respectability, the gospel of unbelief has laid claim to all of life and has, in its silent and surreptitious way, slain its millions....What, the world asks, can you do with the Bible today? Rule the country? We have
politicians for that. Promote health? We have the medical profession and modern hospitals for that. Grow good crops? We have agronomists, policy makers and fertilizer for that. Welfare? We have competent social planners for that. Law and order? We determine that by our own democratic privilege --Rousseau's Social Contract.

There is no longer any room for God. This must be highly offensive to the believer. Does it not cut and grieve the true believer deeply? Our world is not like that of the Korah Levite, or of Hezekiah, who had to endure open abuse of God's name (Isaiah 36; II Kings 18; II Chronicles 32). Criticism today takes the form of icy indifference, which spreads silently like a poison through the whole body of mankind, until it kills in the end....

Verse 11:

Why are you cast down, 0 my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

The psalmist painstakingly recovers his hope for the second time. Alone, amid the solitude and loneliness of the mountains, he had yet to weather another wave of scorn. But then, is God not a living God? Not just in the sense of existing, but in the sense of acting? Well then, why should he remain downcast? Is there not every reason to believe that God, his help, will redeem him? Is it not certain that God will one day restore him to his beloved temple worship, where he can take his rightful place among the believers? "I shall again praise him --in the temple!" The second part of the psalm ends as the first had, with a note of confidence in Yahweh!
Psalm 43, verse 1:
Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from deceitful and unjust men deliver me!

Who were these "ungodly" people? Were they pagans or apostate Israelites? There is some reason to believe that they were Israelites who had forsaken the covenant and had become "ungodly" or "wicked", that is, guilty of breaking their covenant oaths. However, that may be, and the point is not very important, they were people who wanted nothing to do with Yahweh.

In any event, the Levite was powerless against the abuse. It evidently affected him very deeply, just as we today should be deeply concerned about the denial of God in our world.

Undoubtedly, the Levite felt that this was a great injustice. For that matter, his exile, if it was that, may have been the result of an injustice. What mattered, however, was that his God was being unjustly maligned. And when it appeared that Yahweh had deserted him -- the concept of a territorial god was, after all, pretty universal --, he once again confessed his reliance upon God: "the living God", "my redeemer and my God", "the God of my life", "God, my rock", "God my exceeding joy", "my God".

The issue between the godless world and the worshipers of Yahweh is brought sharply into focus by the psalm. In that regards, too, it is an instructional psalm. It gives the believer perspectives on how to look at the world, on culture and ourselves. It gives us the ammunition needed to combat modern ideas of God as a primitive invention superceded by autonomous man who maps out his own destiny according to his sovereign will. "Fear the God of the Bible", says the psalmist. "But where is that God? laughs the world. How is the issue to be settled?

***
In verse 1, the psalmist owns the cause of the Lord and makes it his personal issue. He proceeds to ask Yahweh to vindicate him, to defend his cause. How often do we find in contemporary hymns, or in the writings of, say, Thomas a Kempis, the plea for vindication? This once again demonstrates the superiority of the psalms. They keep confronting us with the great issue between faith and unbelief, while many hymns seem reluctant to appeal to a believer's righteousness in order to ask for God's vindication. Many would sooner seek their own justice, through litigation or protest marches, and find the theme of this psalm insufferably "passive". However, to trust infallibly in God's dispensation of justice is hardly a passive act; on the contrary, it's a positive act of unparalleled faith!

***

The author of Psalm 42/3 was in good company. Before him, David had presented his case against Saul and Nabal in the same fashion (cf. I Samuel 24:16, 25:39; Psalm 35). Jeremiah also appealed to Yahweh against his "pious" enemies: "O Lord of hosts, who judgest righteously...to thee have I committed my cause" (Jeremiah 11:20; cf. 20:12). Psalm 119:154 also prayed: "Plead my cause...."

We know from our Lord that God has given to Him authority to judge, in the great judgment, between His faithful children and the apostate world, whether this be an unbelieving church or the world outside the church (John 5:22,27). "And will not God vindicate his elect, ...he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:7,8). The faith he was referring to, of course, was the rock-ribbed faith of our Levite, of David and Jeremiah, who dared to appeal to Yahweh and entrusted their cause to Him.
Verse 2 and 3:

For thou art the God in whom I take refuge; why hast thou cast me off?
Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?
Oh send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me, let them bring me to thy holy hill and to thy dwelling!

In its allegorical use, "darkness" meant whatever came from Satan, "light" referred to whatever accompanies life with Yahweh, according to His covenant: life, joy, protection/Job 10:3, 29:3; Psalm 18:29, 27:1, 44:4, 118:27; Micah 7:8). "Faithfulness" is synonymous with "truth" as we saw earlier. What the psalmist is saying is this: If only Yahweh would send His light, or redemption, and His truth, or faithfulness, and take him back to his beloved temple worship, because that, after all, was his life! Why was the psalmist so drawn to God's holy hill?

Verse 4:

Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise thee with the lyre, O God, my God.

Those familiar with Exodus 25-40 and Leviticus 1-7 can well understand the Levite's longing. Temple worship was the centre of an Israelite's existence, and this was probably even more true of the priests and Levites. The "holy hill" was the Good News to the Israelite, without which life was unbearable. The temple held a magnificent attraction for all. It was the nerve centre of Old Testament proclamation.

The psalmist singles out the altar, because that's where the service of sacrifice took place (Leviticus 1-7; cf. Leviticus, ). The altar worship was the quintessence of Hebrew worship. It was before the altar of Yahweh that all was made well. The altar represented
the core of the Good News message, not just in the form of an allegorical reference to the coming of the Lamb of God, but as assurance of all God's promises to believers. The service of offering was the sacramental confirmation of the gifts of grace God bestowed on His people: our justification, our sanctification and our glorification (Leviticus, ).

Small wonder the Levite longed to go back!

Once back in Jerusalem, he would be able to share in the offerings which would guarantee forgiveness of his sins and reconciliation with God. He would be able to see once again the signs and seals of his justification and sanctification, dispensed on the altar in the temple. He would be able to lead his fellow worshipers in the procession to the temple and join his brethren—around-the-table, signifying God's promise that he would share in the restored communion with God in the new paradise.

Do we marvel at his praise of "God, my exceeding joy"? It was God who had declared his innocence of sin and guilt and had assured his eternal life! He couldn't wait to take his lyre in hand and lead the throng of pilgrims into the temple court! He couldn't wait to praise Yahweh, who had led him from his exile in strange lands, back to the holy hill of Zion! To him, longing for God was not a quest for "mystical union" or the desire of the "inner heart", but a concrete need for the Gospel and God's praise, through song and sacrifice. Three centuries later, the way to God still goes through Spirit, Word, baptism, communion and faith.

***

The temple worship has, of course, no longer any validity. All the so-called "holy places", the land of Palestine included, are no longer holy. That has all been superseded by the coming of Jesus (Hebrews 8). God now lives in His congregation, through His Spirit.
(Ephesians 2:22). Like the Levite longed for worship in Jerusalem's temple, the Christian should yearn for communal existence within God's community. This need is often accentuated when old age, illness or other causes prevent parts of God's people from sharing in the blessings of the whole. Another example of prophetic fulfillment of a psalm: first, it was actualized in the life of the Levite, and in countless others of his day; secondly, and climactically, it was fulfilled by our Lord, Jesus Christ; thirdly, it is being fulfilled today in the lives of those unable to participate in the worship services of God's people.

Verse 5:

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

With words of comfort such as these, the psalmist expressed his confidence that Yahweh, his Redeemer, would most certainly restore him to his proper place in the temple worship service. The message has been gratefully adopted by many through the ages: prisoners, locked away from the community because of their faith; the faithful, who bemoaned the lack of true proclamation in their churches; the dying, who saw in this psalm yet another dimension of hope, one which stretched beyond the grave into eternal life.

That raises the final matter. Psalm 42/3 may originally have been intended for the ancient Israelite and his worship in Jerusalem, a worship limited in time and space; it is also applicable to us and our worship services not limited in space, but only in time; But the psalm also refers to the new Jerusalem. I won't say that this is what the author had in mind; undoubtedly, he did not. But the prophetic nature of the psalm broadens its meaning and application, so that it is relevant for all time and space.
A world war has erupted! The ancient giant, Assyria, has been awakened from sleep and has resolutely reached for world domination. It has spread its many mighty tenacles in all directions. It has seized the silver mines of Taurus in Asia-Minor and thrust its hand out to the Mediterranean coast.

Endless columns of infantry and cavalry are presently moving in the direction of the Fertile Crescent, which serves as the bridge to the arch-rival, Egypt. Thousands of hooves, chariot wheels and jackboots carry the might of Assyria ominously close to the harbours of Tyre and Palestine, important centres of Mediterranean world trade.

Wherever Assyria moves, the imperilled peoples flee, shouting the fearful cry: "Run; the Assyrians are coming!"

Agrarian people seek refuge in fortified cities, but not one is designed to stem the Assyrian tide. One nation after another inevitably surrenders. City-kings lose their eyes to the cruel invader; others lose noses, ears or lips. Still others are impaled on spears or stakes or taken into captivity with hooks mercilessly run through their noses. To break the resistance of the local population, whole towns and districts are forcibly removed from their country. In its wake, the juggernaut leaves a scorched earth and burning rubble. Buzzards feast on corpses. The harvest is taken. The spectre of hunger is everywhere.

In 722 B.C., Samaria fell and the Ten Tribes were led into captivity. Two decades later, Assyria swept through Judah and demanded the capitulation of Jerusalem. At that point, Yahweh called a halt to the Assyrian advance and thereby saved His city.
Following this near-disaster and the miraculous deliverance, the sons of Korah composed Psalm 46.

1. A psalm from the Isaiah-school.

In contrast to unbelievers' interpretations of world events, this was not an "accidental" political development. Long ago, Amos had asked: "Does evil befall a city, and the people are not afraid? Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:6ff.). During the Assyrian crisis, Yahweh revealed His will to His servant Isaiah. Isaiah not only experienced the great struggle, but he also played a large role in the history which preceded it. He was not merely a spokesman in some remote, forgotten hamlet, but chronicler at the Judaean court (II Chronicles 26:22). As such, he must have been quite well-known, a man who lived right in the centre of the decision making machinery of state.

Probably he was somewhat less than well-liked in court circles. For years he had voiced minority opinion and had opposed a government policy which enjoyed great popularity. His constant appeals to the people to rely on Yahweh only had earned him the scorn of many and the support of only a few. Since Psalm 46 reflects Isaiah's sole reliance on Yahweh, its author was probably a student of Isaiah or at least his spiritual kin. Both Isaiah's convictions and the psalmist's praise focus on the fundamental Immanuel message.
"God with us!"

"God with us", or "Immanuel", was Isaiah's message to king Ahaz, who, through duplicity and diplomacy, tried to secure Judaea's independence. Roughly, his plan was to make himself immune from Assyrian imperialism by making an alliance with them. At the same time, the Ten Tribes, about a decade before their exile, were cementing a pact with Syria, in the hope of stopping the Assyrian aggressors at the Orontes River. Ahaz refused adamantly to participate in this alliance. Accordingly, Ephraim and Syria decided to rid themselves of their mutual enemy and set up a puppet regime in Jerusalem, which could be forced to do the allies' bidding. This probably explains the Syrian-Israelite attack on Judah (II Kings 16:5; II Chronicles 28:5-15).

Isaiah has left us an account of the tense, hasty defensive preparations. King Ahaz personally supervised the construction of the conduit in the fuller's field. During the crisis, Isaiah came to Ahaz and informed him that Jerusalem would not fall, provided Ahaz trusted in Yahweh. Isaiah permitted Ahaz to ask the Lord for a sign as proof of good faith and of Judah's sure deliverance. But the politician Ahaz had already preempted that by appealing to the Assyrians for aid. The sanctimonious Ahaz replied: "No, no, Isaiah, far be it from me to test the Almighty!" To this Isaiah replied: "What! No sign? Then the Lord will give you a sign!"

The sign will be three-fold. First of all, a young woman --king Ahaz' young queen-- will be expecting. Secondly, she will give birth to a son. Contrary to her husband, she will place her trust in the Lord.
Thirdly, she will trustingly call him "Immanuel", as if to say: "You are mother's little Immanuel. Together, we will continue to trust in Yahweh!"

That little lad would become the famous king Hezekiah, who, together with the prophet Isaiah, would play such a large role on the historical background which produced Psalm 46. When the baby Hezekiah was born, Isaiah sang enthusiastically: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...", foreshadowing also the coming of David's Great Descendant (for multiple fulfillments, see § 6). This is the Hezekiah who, through faith in God, will call a halt to the Assyrian war machine.

That's why I called Psalm 46 the \textit{Immanuel} psalm. This poem resounds clearly the faith in Yahweh as it was practised in the school of Isaiah, even though it ran counter to the predominant spirit of the age. It reflects the faith as it had been nourished in the little Hezekiah by his mother, Abijah. It portrays Hezekiah as a genuine Immanuel in a time when Jerusalem was threatened with total annihilation. Before that could happen, however, Hezekiah had much to learn!

Judah in Assyria's sphere of influence.

Let's return briefly to Hezekiah's youth. The pro-Assyrian diplomacy of his father, Ahaz, seemed to result in Judah's independence (II Chronicles 28:21) but Judah clearly fell under the influence of Nineveh. Annually, huge sums of money were required to be sent by subject peoples to the Assyrian capital. Only Egypt remained completely independent.

That was the international stage when Hezekiah ascended the throne.

In 705 B.C., however, the Assyrian king Sargon was assassinated and the powerful Assyrian hegemony seemed on the point of dissolving. Several exiled peoples
took courage from the temporary disorder and confusion among the ruling classes. Merodach-baladan recaptured Babylon in 703 B.C. Shortly thereafter, Hezekiah was struck with a serious illness. Merodach-baladan sent emissaries to Jerusalem to congratulate Hezekiah on his recovery, and also probably to invite him to join the new military pact against Assyria (II Kings 20).

Unfortunately, the good king accepted the invitation. Together with the others, he, too, denounced his treaty with Nineveh, hoping that the Assyrians would be too disorganized by internal difficulties or too intimidated by the formidable military alliance to try to restore Assyrian imperial rule (II Kings 18:7). While his advisers may ultimately have forced his hand, Isaiah teaches us that this saintly king was not adverse to making alliances with neighbouring states. This was especially true of the ancient superpower, Egypt. Reasoning was that if all Minor Asiatic states banded together under the leadership of Egypt, not even the might of Assyria could withstand them. Under the umbrella provided by Egypt, the smaller states, such as Judah, Moab, Ammon, Tyrus, Edom and Philistia, felt they had a reasonable chance of survival. Because of its strategic location, Judah may even have been the hingepin of the alliance.

Yahweh will whistle for Ashur to come.

Just as now, there were probably many in Hezekiah's day who regarded world events as "accidental happenings". But not so Isaiah. To king Ahaz, he had remarked: "Yahweh will whistle for Ashur to come" (Ashur was Assyria's capital before Nineveh) (Isaiah 7:18). And even before Hezekiah had been born, Isaiah had predicted the coming of the Assyrian giant (Isaiah 7:17). It was God who had given world supremacy to Assyria.
Isaiah had prophesied that Assyria would "rise over all its channels and go over all its banks", and that it would "sweep on into Judah...and pass on, reaching even to the neck" (Isaiah 8:7). Yahweh would use Assyria as a razor to denude Judah and deprive it of its glory (Isaiah 7:20; cf. II Samuel 10:4).

Of course, Yahweh would not do so indiscriminately; He does not chastise gladly or precipitously (Lamentations 3:33). But during Ahaz's reign, Judah had awakened the wrath of God through its desertion of the covenant. Read Yahweh's divine sorrow in Isaiah 1:2ff. Such unfaithfulness was the cause of Assyria's invasion and Judah's apparent end. Judah was under God's judgment, (Isaiah 1, 2:6-4:1, 5:1-30). Yahweh was on the point of pouring out the full curse described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. And for many years, Isaiah had continually reminded the church of his day of the background to the events then unfolding. "That's why", he persisted, "the wrath of God has been ignited against Judah, and He will chastise Judah, so that mountains will quake and corpses will lie in the streets. But still He will not withdraw His wrath, but His hand will remain outstretched in punishment. That's why He will call a nation from the end of the earth to use as His rod for inflicting punishment on his faithless people" (cf. Leviticus 26:30; Deuteronomy 28:49).

For years, he had spoken prophetically about the Assyrian tide: "He will raise a signal for a nation afar off, and whistle for it from the ends of the earth; and lo, swiftly, speedily it comes! None is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps...." (Isaiah 5:26ff.). A disciplined army, armed to the teeth with the most modern war materials, and guided by the hand of the Lord, would soon fall upon a hapless Jerusalem (Isaiah 5:27:30).
For years, Isaiah had warned Judah of the coming storm. Assyria was to be the rod wielded by Yahweh to chastise His people, the axe with which He would hew down the forests of Judah (Isaiah 10:33), although Isaiah also foresaw the ultimate downfall of the ambitious Assyrians (Isaiah 10:5-19, 14:24-27, 30:27-33, 37:26ff.). Assyria's end was also sure: "Therefore the Lord, the Lord of hosts, will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled, like the burning of fire" (Isaiah 10:6,16).

"Woe unto those seeking their refuge in Egypt".

To Isaiah's dismay, Judah's solution to the threat posed by Assyria was to join the Semitic alliance headed by Egypt. The church was of the same opinion: "Egypt is our refuge and our strength, thoroughly reliable in times of crisis" --presumably because it was also threatened by Assyrian ambition.

Small wonder that the book of Isaiah contains many warnings against this calculated politics of unbelief. "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!" (Isaiah 31:1). Was Judah aware that the "Egyptians are men, and not God"? asked Isaiah (31:3). And while Judah's emmisaries travelled to Egypt "to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt" (Isaiah 30:2), the faithful chronicler Isaiah was ordered by Yahweh to walk barefooted, clad only in his undergarment, through the streets of Jerusalem. For three years, and alone! That's how the Assyrians would later humiliate the Egyptian prisoners, "naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt" (Isaiah 20).
"Zion shall be redeemed by justice".

What should Judah have replied to the many diplomatic missions received from abroad? Isaiah's response was: "The Lord has founded Zion, and in her the afflicted of his people find refuge" (Isaiah 14:32). "He who believes will not be in haste", or panic (Isaiah 28:16). "For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength'. And you would not, but you said, 'No! We will speed upon horses', and therefore you shall speed away; and, 'We will ride upon swift steeds,' therefore your pursuers shall be swift" (Isaiah 30:15ff.). This message recapitulates Isaiah's entire proclamation with regard to the growing crisis of his day.

"Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness" (Isaiah 1:27). Judah would have to recognize anew Yahweh's covenantal claim on His people (Leviticus 26:40ff.; Deuteronomy 16:20). Judah would furthermore have to recognize Yahweh's right to punish His erring children. "To the teaching and to the testimony! Surely for this word which they speak there is no dawn" (Isaiah 8:20; cf. 1:28). "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 1:19,20).

"Who has believed what we have heard?"

Only a small minority followed Isaiah's preaching. "Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (Isaiah 53:1). Yahweh had already prepared Isaiah for numerous disappointments at the time of his calling. The Lord had told him that the masses would ignore his message (Isaiah 6). The name of Isaiah's son, Shear-jashub, which means "a remnant shall return", was testimony to this widespread lack of faith in Judah (Isaiah 7:
The name of Isaiah's son, Shear-jashub, which means "a remnant shall return", was testimony to this widespread lack of faith in Judah (Isaiah 7:3; cf. 10:20). In other words, only a small section of the population would repent and return to the Lord. "The people did not turn to him who smote them, nor seek the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 9:13; cf. 17:10, 22:11, 26:10, 27:11). Judah slipped into the world war completely blind to "the arm of Yahweh". And all the while Isaiah resolutely proclaimed to the people: "But the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard a holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread" (Isaiah 8:13). But Judah stubbornly refused (Isaiah 5:12).

Nevertheless, Yahweh gave Isaiah the promised remnant, a few faithful disciples (Isaiah 8:16). A handful of humble faithful attached themselves to Isaiah. They could not, of course, alter the diplomacy of the Judah court, but they continued to confess: "I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him" (Isaiah 8:17). Hezekiah's saintly mother, Abijah, may have belonged to this small circle. It is certain that the school of Levitical Korahites formed part of this community. It is from them that we have Psalm 46. The psalm is entirely consistent with the Immanuel message preached by Isaiah. In fact, some commentators on the Psalms have concluded that Psalm 46 was penned by Isaiah himself. For that reason, I have called Psalm 46 a psalm of the Isaiah-school.

Judah trampled under foot.

Isaiah had been right, of course, and his prophecies soon went into fulfillment. Those who thought that the new Assyrian ruler, Sennacherib, would leave the upstart nations unpunished, were sadly mistaken!
He first secured his eastern borders. Thereupon, he swung his mighty armies south-west to reduce the rebellious states to servitude and possibly also to end Egypt's independence, because he saw that as long as Egypt was given a free hand, it would continue to foment trouble. Among the rebel states was Judah, possibly worse off than some others because it had reneged on its treaty with Nineveh. Sennacherib may well have considered Hezekiah not only a rebel but also a traitor to his cause. With the onslaught of Assyrian might came the desperate cry among the doomed populations: "Flee! The Assyrians are coming for revenge!" As before, endless columns marched irresistible onward, pillaging, burning, maiming and murdering as they went. The very rumour of their coming was enough to reduce the people to total paralysis. Cities fell without a shot being fired. City gates were thrown open and thousands of refugees took to the highways and byways. "Fear of the glory of my august presence cast them down", Sennacherib chortled of his enemies. Smaller states, hoping to avert total disaster, submissively brought Sennacherib presents and prayed him to spare their lives. The Assyrians had their revenge, with their customary barbarity. Excavated reliefs bear witness to that. City-kings had their eyes pried out. Prisoners were horribly mutilated. The notables of the Philistine city of Ekron were impaled on stakes while lesser officials were carried away into captivity.

In the fourteenth year of Hezekiah, Judah was also trampled under foot (II Kings 18:13; II Chronicles 32; Isaiah 36). All Judaean cities were captured and occupied. The wildest rumours were circulated, and, of course, readily believed. Years before, Isaiah had prophesied: "He has come to Aiath; he has passed through Migron...Madmenah is in flight...." (Isaiah 10:28-34). This became reality under Hezekiah's rule. And where was the Egyptian protector? The watchers on the walls
of Jerusalem looked in vain for the Egyptian expeditionary force; they saw instead innumerable refugees, anxiously seeking safety from the cruel invader.... They also saw burning cities and smouldering ruins. For days, they saw skies that were black and red, from fire and smoke of scores of cities, towns and villages which had been put to the torch. Unspeakable horrors were whispered by the distraught survivors. Assyrian annals also describe parts of Sennacherib's punitive campaign in Judah: "And of Hezekiah...I laid siege to forty-six fortified cities...I took 200,150 captives and much cattle. Hezekiah himself I locked up in Jerusalem, as a bird in a cage...." (the annals do not mention the siege of Jerusalem)7

There seemed no hope left for Jerusalem....

***

At this point, Hezekiah collapsed from sheer despair. He paid the Assyrians millions to try to buy them off, but still the merciless Sennacherib demanded the surrender of the city. He sent three generals and a powerful division to encircle the city and force its surrender through masterful psychological warfare (II Kings 18:17-35; Isaiah 36:2-20; II Chronicles 32:9-19). Did the soldiers of Judah trust in Yahweh? the Assyrians taunted. If that were the case, it would be a unique event, because no god had yet been able to frustrate the Assyrian advance....

The angel of Yahweh intervenes.

At the height of the crisis, Hezekiah proved that he was cut from the same cloth as his ancestor David. He proved to be a man who confessed what his mother had taught him. Having received the Assyrian ultimatum, he went into mourning and humbly entered the house of Yahweh (II Kings 19:1). To whom did he then send for help? He turned to the prophet Isaiah, who had long
predicted the bankruptcy of Judah's foreign policy, even as far back as Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, and had continually admonished Judah to repent and turn instead to Yahweh. It must have been very enheartening to the Isaiah circle, when the king sent his desperate appeal to Isaiah and declared himself willing to humble himself before the Lord. The king's messenger specifically asked Isaiah, whose message had so long been ignored, to intercede on behalf of the seemingly doomed city. Hezekiah also sent Sennacherib's ultimatum to Isaiah. But in asking for pardon, Hezekiah did not appeal to his feats as temple reformer of years gone by, but submitted himself completely to the justice of the Lord, and based his plea on the glory of the name of Yahweh (II Chronicles 29-31; II Kings 19:14-19).

***

At this point, the Angel of the Lord, God's Son before His incarnation (Joshua, ), intervened to relieve the city. As morning dawned, the Assyrian army counted 185,000 dead. In one single night, the power of the Assyrians had been swept away. What had been the point of the carefully engineered alliances? Then Sennacherib, less his august presence, fled back to Nineveh, hastily and ignominiously....(II Kings 19: 35ff.).

Historical background to Psalm 46.

The above events are generally accepted as the historical background to Psalm 46. Jerusalem had known sieges before, but these are not applicable because they always resulted in its capture. At the time of Psalm 46's composition, this was not the case (cf. II Chronicles 12:1-16; II Kings 25). In addition, the psalm deals with a genuine world war, in which "nations rage...kingdoms totter" (verse 6). There is really no other possibility than the Assyrian invasion
under Sennacherib during the days of the saintly Hezekiah.

In any case, this gives the psalm historical detail, a concrete background which is essential for a meaningful reading of the psalm. No psalm, as I've observed earlier, lacks this historical background; psalms are not "generally religious" in character; their meaning has been disclosed in a particular historical situation. Psalm 46 is not a song for all time or all people; it is applicable only to spiritual disciples of Isaiah, past and present. This is why I originally inquired into the school of thought and belief which produced this psalm. It evidently came from the circle of Isaiah disciples, or the Isaiah-school, otherwise known as the Immanuel-circle.

2. Verses 1-3: "...though the earth should change..."

Peace and serenity have returned to Judah. The cacophony of was has receded. The whole nation breathed a sigh of relief. Refugees started the long trek back to their native towns. There was no shortage of food (Isaiah 37:30). The moment has arrived to praise Yahweh.

The Levites, appointed by Yahweh to lead His services, have begun to call the nation back to the Lord. Among them was one family, the Korahites, who have long been foremost in leading the people back to God, to His House, and to His messiah-king. They had composed many psalms (46, 42-49, 84, 85, 87, 88). Following the defeat of Sennacherib by Yahweh, one among them took it upon himself to commit to lyrics the events of Jerusalem's redemption and the rightful honour of Yahweh as Judah's true and only refuge.

Dividing the psalm.

Psalm 46 should be divided into three parts: a) Psalm 46:1-3; b) Psalm 46:4-7; and c) Psalm 46:8-11.
It is curious that the last two parts close with the same refrain, but the first part does not. Both verses 7 and 11 have: "Yahweh of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge". It is generally accepted by commentators that this was an oversight by the author, and that the refrain should be inserted after verse 3 as well. It seems more appropriate to also have the first part close with the confession, "Yahweh of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge".

Praise and trust.

The author uses part one (verses 1-3) to describe Yahweh as such a powerful refuge and strength for his people, that the nation may feel secure even if the world were to come to an end. Psalm 46 is not only a praise psalm to Yahweh, but also registers a tremendous vote of confidence in God, the Father of Jesus Christ, who has also made His covenant with us.

Verse 1:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

Hezekiah had known trouble and distress, when he first sent his messengers to Isaiah: "...This day is a day of distress..." (II Kings 19:3). The nation and its king had lived in terror of the Assyrian threat. A siege must have been a terrible event by any standard. The Assyrian Rabshakeh had roundly cursed Yahweh and had told the Judaean soldiers on Jerusalem's wall in no uncertain terms that resistance against Sennacherib was futile. He had warned them to surrender or be forced to eat their own dung and drink their own urine (II Kings 18:27). What would have happened, had Jerusalem collapsed? Undoubtedly, Hezekiah's eyes would have been cruelly cut out. Probably, Secretary of State Shebnah would have been impaled on a stake. No, the Korahites did not exaggerate when they typified the harrowing experience as "trouble", though it might have been an understatement.
The Assyrian messenger had ridiculed everything Judah had once relied on or might have relied on: their allies, their military, their king and even their God! "Come now, gentlemen", they had sneered, "your God is like all the rest, a good-for-nothing!" (II Kings 18:17-35; II Chronicles 32:10-19; Isaiah 36). "Are you still counting", they continued, "on that broken reed, which calls itself Egypt?" (II Kings 18:21). And what, furthermore, would become of the civilian population, at least that part which hoped to survive the devastation? They would unquestionably have been deported and enslaved or executed. Could anyone parallel the unspeakable atrocities of the Assyrians? 

But the nightmare of the Assyrians had vanished and the thankful Korah Levites proceeded to sing God's praise: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble". (Psalm 32:6; Isaiah 55:6)

King David had already learned that if "you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will cast you off for ever" (I Chronicles 28:9; cf. II Chronicles 15:2). Seeking Yahweh was precisely what the god-fearing Hezekiah and the intercessor Isaiah together with the Remnant had done. Hezekiah had sought God through his temple reformation and his appeal to the name of Yahweh. Isaiah and his disciples had sought Yahweh for many years by patiently waiting for Him (Isaiah 8:16ff.). Those were times when Yahweh could still be found because He was still present (Psalm 32:6; Isaiah 55:6)

Verse 2 and 3:
Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with it.
Verses 2 and 3:

Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

These two verses can be read simply as poetic descriptions of the Assyrian invasions in the Near East. The Isaiah-school often depicted the Assyrian assaults as a tidal wave (Isaiah 8:7ff., 17:12; cf. Psalm 65:7). The movements of the super-power were indeed very much like a tempestuous sea which had swallowed the nations in its raging tumult. What better imagery to describe the deportation of whole nations? Sennacherib had brought about a geopolitical earthquake which had dismembered entire states and dethroned ancient dynasties. Boundaries had been erased and time-honoured traditions uprooted within the space of a few years. There is one problem with this reading, however: it is duplicated by the message of the second part of the psalm, verses 4 through 7. Therefore, I prefer the following explanation.

Yahweh had irresistibly brought deliverance for His people. He had broken a super-power and ended a cataclysm. There is no end to the peoples' awe for their Lord. The poet was obviously determined to find the most graphic and impressive ways possible to describe God's acts. He settled on the language of the universally catastrophic Flood. As contemporary of Isaiah, he undoubtedly knew all about earthquakes. Isaiah once described one (Isaiah 24:19ff.; cf. 29:6, 54:10; Ezechiel 38:19; Haggai 2:7). He may have experienced the one which struck during Uzziah's reign; it lived long in peoples' memory (Amos 1:1; Zechariah 14:5; II Chronicles 26:22; Isaiah 6:1). But the psalmist is not referring to an ordinary earthquake. More likely he is alluding to something similar to the cataclysmic Flood, when even the seafloor erupted. He is dealing in
superlatives: the whole earth could be moved and mountains could topple into the sea. And what could be more permanently immovable than mountains? (Isaiah 54:10). Apparently, he also envisioned the stupendous movement of seas, as must have taken place during the third day of creation, or during the great Flood. But even through these tremendous upheavals we should not fear, because God is our refuge and our strength.

A more decided and pronounced confession is not imaginable! It was a beautiful tribute to bring to Yahweh! And let's not forget that even now, our great God loves nothing better than to receive our trust and adoration!14

Refrain:

The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

The watchword in the Isaiah-school was "Immanu (with us) El" (God). The psalmist changed this only slightly to "Yahweh sebaoth immanu" (Yahweh of hosts is with us) and made it into his refrain. The change, however, is consistent with Isaiahic usage, seeing that the phrase "Yahweh sebaoth immanu" appears no less than fifty-four times in the first thirty-nine chapters of the book of Isaiah.

The historical context explains why this phrase was so popular to prophet and psalmist alike. For decades, Judah's motto had been: "Egypt with us!" All that time, Isaiah and his faithful band had been struggling against the current. "No", they said, "God with us; that should be our creed". Judah should have remembered that God was even prepared to enlist the services of sun, moon and stars to help His people (Joshua 10:12-14; Judges 5:20; cf. Joshua, ). Why not then rely on Yahweh and His hosts, since, if necessary, He could conscript the entire universe to achieve His objectives? Was He not Israel's covenant partner, its ally? Why bank on Egypt and its "hosts"?

Then, when the yawning jaws of doom opened before the quaking men of Judah, Yahweh sent His Angel, the Supreme Commander of His forces. Within the space of a few hours,
the Angel had obliterated Sennacherib's designs at the cost of 185,000 dead. Even if the term "thousand" designates an army unit, say a batallion, the number of slain Assyrian soldiers was astonishing (cf. Numbers-Deuteronomy). As it was, the actions of the Angel were carried out in deadly silence; He could have brought down a torrent of meteors, as the Canaanites had previously discovered (Joshua 10:11; cf. Joshua). Sennacherib, it's true, had captured all the stone-walled fortresses of Judah, but the wall of the fortress of Yahweh had proved to be his undoing....

Now, the tenors and sopranos among God's people burst out in song: "The God of Jacob is our refuge!" This name was a favourite among both Korahites and Asaphites. Had father Jacob not called the angels who came to meet him "the army of God"? (Genesis 32:2).

"The Lord of hosts is with us!" This is also a comfort to the church of Christ when imperilled by the Beast of violence (Revelation 13:1-10) and the Beast of duplicity (Revelation 13:11-18). The enemies are not necessarily the Sennacherib's of this world; they may also be the gnostic heretics and false prophets existing within the confines of the christian church. God's chariots are "twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands" (Psalm 68:17), if only the faithful are prepared to see them (II Kings 6:15-17). "There is one greater with us than with him", confessed Hezekiah during the menacing siege, "with him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God (Immanuel), to help us and to fight our battles" (II Chronicles 32:7ff.).

To which Abijah, his mother, would have added: "Immanu El".

3. Verses 4-7: "He utters his voice, the earth melts".

Following the "vote of confiênce" of part 1, the poet identifies the basis of his confidence, the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib's stranglehold.
As the motif changes, so does the imagery. Assyrian aggression reminded the psalmist of a cataclysmic eruption which moved the mountains and sundered the seas. But when he turned to the city of God, he chose as his image a pastoral brook, streams of water so dear to the Israelite heart.

Verse 4:

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

Unlike, for example, Babel, Jerusalem was not situated on a river. However, the city was the proud possessor of the Gihon springs, from which sprang the gently flowing waters of Shiloah (Isaiah 8:6). Hezekiah had constructed an aqueduct, which is actually a tunnel 530 meters long, to link the city with the Gihon spring, located roughly 80 meters outside the eastwall of Jerusalem. (The aqueduct runs parallel to the eastwall for about 300 meters, crosses the wall, and empties into the Pool of Shiloah, or Siloah).

But what did the author have in mind with "a river whose streams make glad the city of God"? He may well have meant the waters of Shiloah, which were the principal source of water, and, especially during a siege, of cardinal importance (II Kings 20:20; II Chronicles 32:30). But whether the inauspicious stream of water, which for a good part of the year was bone-dry, can be elevated to "a river" may well exhaust the imagination. I would prefer not to allegorize a stream of honest-to-goodness water into a stream of grace, but a plausible explanation is so difficult that we may have to conclude that the author resorted to some literary device or other. It is possible, of course, that the poet was inspired, not so much by the stream, as by Isaiah's allusion to the stream.

However that may be, the poet's imagery is thoroughly biblical. Drinking water was precious in those arid regions,
and unquestionably represented all the wonderful gifts God had given His people (cf. Isaiah 33:20ff., 55:1; Jeremiah 2:13; John 4:13ff.; Revelation 21:6, 22:1,17)\textsuperscript{22}

Psalm 46:4 compares the blessing of the Temple as it pertains to Jerusalem with a river in a parched land. God's House is not compared to a spring or a cistern of water, which practically each Israelite city and town boasted, but to a river, with tributaries, no less! Such mighty rivers were only known to the Israelite through legend. The abundance of water which flowed through such a river is made to represent God's holiness in the city of Jerusalem, the City of the Most High.

Was it not true that a stream of blessings flowed from the dwelling place of the Almighty? Did not the Most High live behind the curtains of the Holies? There, indeed, stood the ark, the throne of God, and His most holy altar. There, also, were the two tablets of the Horeb covenant, the foundation of Israel's life. Had Yahweh not promised to heed the petitions brought to His House (I Kings 8:22-53, 9:3). Had He not personally read Sennacherib's ultimatum here, and had He answered Hezekiah's pleas? In brief, all the components of His House were testimonies of the redeeming knowledge of the only true God.

Perhaps verse 4 was intended to convey a sense of the joy Israelites felt for this river, which had been dammed up under the rule of the godless Ahaz, and released during the reforming efforts of king Hezekiah. We do not know how much the sons of Korah, authors of Psalm 46, had contributed to the temple reformation. It was probably a great deal; they were, after all, Levites! (cf. II Chronicles 29:31). Perhaps the verse refers to God's faithful revelations of Himself to His prophet, Isaiah, who for years had attempted to show Israel the Lord's way and had relayed God's steadfast promises to the faithful remnant (Isaiah 8:20, 2:1-5, 10:15-19, 11:1-10).

Verse 5:

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;
God will help her right early.
While Sennacherib may have taken many famous cities, he had not been able to reduce Jerusalem, "the city of the great King" (Psalm 48:2). It is ironic that it was here, on the "holy mountain" (Psalm 48:2), that the Assyrian general called Sennacherib "the great king, the king of Assyria" (II Kings 18:19,28). That, surely, was a colossal mistake, because the great King did not reside in Nineveh but in Jerusalem. And Sennacherib was made painfully aware of this by Israel's Suzerain.

"God shall be our help", had been the theme which the sons of Korah had learned in the Isaiah-school, while nearly all Judah had based its expectations on Egyptian help. Isaiah had been widely scorned because of his Immanuel-message (Isaiah 28:9ff.). But he had been right, and had warned Judah: "If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established" (Isaiah 7:9). But faith in Yahweh had ultimately saved Israel, at the break of dawn\(^23\) (verse 5). This refers to a specific moment in time: "And that night the angel of the Lord went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in themorning, behold, these were all dead bodies" (II Kings 19:23\(^24\)). At the very hour of Assyrian's assault, the angel of the hosts of Yahweh had struck\(^25\).

"God will be our help!" That truth, however, is more easily confessed with the mouth than translated into deeds. Not super-powers, great men or popes and synods form our shield, but God is our fortress in the struggles of this life, provided, of course, we serve Him and honour our covenant obligations. We can then repeat after Isaiah: "Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 12:6). And if His people should not serve Him, He would not always be in her midst; but I'll return to that later.

Verse 6:

The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
He utters his voice, the earth melts.
Behind the first line lies the indescribable sorrow suffered during the world war just ended. It reflects the thunder of battering rams, the sobs of women molested by pillaging soldiers, the smouldering ruins, the endless lines of prisoners and refugees, the noise of chariots and the rattling of sabers. Indeed, "kingdoms totter", including that of Hezekiah. As I wrote earlier, Sennacherib had come to restore his hegemony in the whole southwestern corner of his empire, and also brought to heel his mighty rival, Egypt. All nations from the Tigris to the Nile had to be brought under the "outspread wings" --emblem of Assyria-- of Sennacherib's imperium (Isaiah 8:8). Hamath, Arpad, Chaldea, Moab, Ammon, Philistia and Egypt were all involved in this war (cf. II Kings 18:34, 19:12).

Then God raised His voice.

The world war had not, of course, come about by itself. Not even world wars --including those of the twentieth century-- are beyond God's plan (Isaiah 10:5; Amos 3:6). Yahweh himself had called the Assyrians into the West (Isaiah 7:18ff.). No one had been able to stop them. Even the mighty Egypt had tottered. Only Yahweh had been able to stop Sennacherib, and He did so with divine ease. The brevity of verse 6 reflects the speed with which Yahweh intervened.

He brought about Sennacherib's end by means of his famous "voice", with which He had created the heavens and the earth. Isaiah had previously proclaimed the downfall of Sennacherib with reference to God's voice: "And the Lord will cause his majestic voice to be heard, and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and tempest and hailstones. The Assyrians will be terror-stricken at the voice of the Lord, when he smites with his rod" (Isaiah 30:30,31).

And, in retrospect, we know who the Angel of Yahweh was, through whom Yahweh spoke to the world situation and fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

Then "melted the earth" (Amos 9:5; Isaiah 17:12-14). The world was awe-struck by the Great King of Israel, who had destroyed Sennacherib in one singleness. Yahweh was once again the centre of global news. Even heathens acknowledged His...
supreme sovereignty. "And many brought gifts to the Lord to Jerusalem" (II Chronicles 32:33).

Which of us can see our own present day history with the same humility as did the Korahite psalmists of the eighth century before Christ? How man christians have heard the "voice" of Yahweh in the eruption and ending of our twentieth century world wars? Do we still believe that God can use today's world powers as a rod with which He punished His faithless people? (Isaiah 10:5)

Verse 7:

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Following the war, that was a refrain Judah could freely sing again! Thirty years before, Isaiah had stood before Hezekiah's apostate father, Ahaz, who had just appealed to Assyria for help. God's covenant had then been in utter ruin. God's temple had been shamefully abused. Candles had been extinguished, incense burners and sacrificial offerings had long not been tended and the doors to the court had been sealed. (II Chronicles 29:7). Ahaz had even erected an Assyrian altar (II Kings 16:10-15). Was it surprising that Yahweh had visited Judah with His covenant curse? (Isaiah 1:2-9) The Assyrian peril had descended upon Israel and Judah as a result of their sins. For years, Isaiah had prophesied this.

But Hezekiah had led Judah in a return to Yahweh by commanding the levites to purify the temple and restore the proper service in the house of Yahweh (II Chronicles 29:35). Possibly, the author of Psalm 46 helped in this cause. At long last, the Passover was being observed (II Chronicles 30:1-31:1). The pillars, Asherim, high places and altars dedicated to pagan idols were destroyed. While politically, Hezekiah may subsequently have had difficult times, he was nevertheless truly humble, and did not disclaim his co-responsibility with the unrighteousness of his forefathers: "For lo, our fathers have fallen by the sword and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this" (II Chronicles 29:5-10; in 722, the Assyrians had led many of the Ten Tribes into captivity). Hezekiah also called
upon the remnant of the Ten Tribes to repent: "O people of Israel, return to the Lord...that his fierce anger may turn away from you! (II Chronicles 30:6-9). That's how Hezekiah and the levites had worked for the cause of the Lord before Sennacherib had attacked. The author of Chronicles began his account by relaying Hezekiah's efforts at reformation: "After these things and these acts of faithfulness Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah..." (II Chronicles 32:1). The author often made the relation between Judah's faithfulness and periods of prosperity in the Theocracy. 28 We may, therefore, not dissociate God's redemption of Jerusalem from Hezekiah's temple reformation. First, repentance had to take place (II Chronicles 29:10). Thereafter, it was clear from Sennacherib's defeat that Yahweh had turned away His "burning wrath" from Judah. This was consistent with Isaiah's proclamation: "You must call on Yahweh of hosts, the Supreme Commander of all the heavenly hosts of land, sea and sky! Your enemies will not stand a chance!" When Judah had repented of its idolatry and its reliance on foreign alliances, it could once again confess its faith: "Yahweh of hosts is with us!" Under Ahaz' regime, however, the godfearing could only lament: "Yahweh of hosts is against us".

***

Verse 7 cannot be divorced from the context of the entire psalm, nor from the historical situation in which the Korahites wrote the psalm. It was not the Korahites' intent to advance a timeless, religious thesis; they related concrete experiences of the Shear-jashub, the Remnant which had repented and thereupon professed: "God is with us; He has come again!"

4. Verses 8-11: "Come, behold the works of Yahweh".

The end of war always shows the same devastation. That's why it's easy for us to imagine the destruction caused by the Assyrian campaigns. Wherever the "Grande Armee" of Sennacherib, an early version of Napoleon, had gone, it had disrupted the economy, burned cities and ravaged the land. It was just as
Isaiah had forecast: "Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath...." (Isaiah 5:9; cf. Isaiah 24).

Isaiah had repeatedly pointed to the hand of God in these disastrous events, but who had listened? And as a true pupil of Isaiah, the psalmist focussed attention on Yahweh as the one who brings about war and can as quickly end it.

Verse 8:

Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has wrought desolations in the earth.

One thing Isaiah had always taught: it was Yahweh who disciplined the church and the world (Isaiah 1:5). "Why will you still be smitten?" he had asked the people of Judah, although he undoubtedly also had the Ten Tribes in mind. "Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, overthrown by aliens" (Isaiah 1:7; cf. 5:9). Verse 8 refers not only to the destruction of the Assyrian army and the liberation of Jerusalem, but also to His acts of judgment and curse. This judgment and curse applied not merely to Sennacherib and his army, but also to Judah and its neighbours (Amos 1). Assyria had been Yahweh's rod (Isaiah 10:5-19).

Hezekiah probably had no difficulty with this verse; during the siege he had already confessed: "This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace...." (Isaiah 37:3). However, many had not recognized the judgment inherent in those years of strife, so that Isaiah was led to complain: "The people did not turn to him who smote them" (Isaiah 9:13). "But you did not look to him who did it, or have regard for him who planned it long ago" (Isaiah 22:11; cf. 26:10ff., 27:11; I Peter 5:6). Even the prophets, appointed to be the "eyes" of the people, were blind to God's judgment. That, too, was part of God's judgment: He had made sleepwalkers out of the people.
of Judah, and had sealed His Word to them (Isaiah 29:10ff., 22:11, 6:9ff., 8:16ff.).

However, the circle of Korahites, from which we have Psalm 46, had remained awake. When, therefore, Yahweh had humiliated the mighty Assyrians, it was they who called their Judaean brothers and sisters to acknowledge God's deeds in the world historical events they had just experienced. God had beckoned Assyria to come (Isaiah 5:26). It was He who had blinded the eyes of Egyptian diplomats and broken the might of their generals (Isaiah 19:4, 14, 20:4, 30:3). It was He who had humiliated Sennacherib's servants and executed judgment upon Sennacherib himself (Isaiah 37:6, 37:26ff.). Were the people of Judah finally prepared to see that?

According to Calvin, less than one percent of the people are willing or able to see God's hand in world history. Most are content only to see the human side. Who actually believes that God guides global politics? How many can actually discern the judgmental nature of events taking place today?

Twice in three decades, christianized nations have bled profusely from thousands of wounds. Their children's corpses lay dead and decaying on soil everywhere in Europe and Asia (Leviticus 26:30; Deuteronomy 28:26; Jeremiah 16:4, 25:33). Their cities were reduced to rubble, their colonies were lost, and, geopolitically, they were degraded from the leading "head" to the trailing "tail" (Deuteronomy 28:13). Yet how many saw in this God's New Testament covenant curse descending upon a christianity which had rejected the blood of His Son and had scorned His Spirit? Who saw the parallel between Berlin and Sennacherib's Nineveh? How many, when visiting the military cemeteries all over Europe, are reminded of the words of the Korahites: "Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has wrought desolations in the earth"?

Verse 9:

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, he burns the chariots with fire!
Verse 9 continues the appeal of verse 8: "Come, behold the works of the Lord!" The Angel of the Lord had accomplished what the entire allied might of Egypt and the Near East had failed to bring about. With one crushing blow, He ended the war and its rumours "to the end of the earth". Henceforth, there would be no more of Sennacherib's armies. His humiliation before Jerusalem spelled the end of his conquests. Sennacherib went home "and dwelt at Nineveh" (Isaiah 37:37). "For thou, O Lord, art most high over all the earth" (Psalm 97:9). God gives to certain nations at specific times the command to form history, even to start a world war, but He can also end that war without much difficulty.

Defeated armies always leave behind huge amounts of war materials. The 185,000 Assyrian dead probably left behind many spears, bows and chariots. Chariots, particularly in mountainous Judah, were expensive status symbols, which were useful only for display and had little military value (II Samuel 15:1; 1 Kings 1:5). Yahweh abhorred these ancient "tanks" and restricted their use in Israel (Deuteronomy 17:16). A prophet of the Most High was worth at least as much as all "the chariots of Israel and its horsemen" (II Kings 2:12, 13:14). Isaiah fulminated against their use, not just from a social standpoint --although there were probably many in Judah who had been victimized by them-- but because their existence in Judah jeopardized the "Immanuel-faith" proclaimed by Isaiah (2:21).

Once Hezekiah had learned his lesson, he lived out of a different faith than in horses and chariots: "Some boast of chariots, and some of horses; but we boast of the name of the Lord our God" (Psalm 20:7; cf. 33:17). An unbelieving king would have been delighted at the booty left behind by the Assyrians, but it's likely that Hezekiah had everything destroyed. This is probably what the Korahites meant with "he burns the chariots with fire". And that's how it was: God destroyed; it was an act of God, and that's something all Judah would have to come to believe. It was like that in 1945, when God made the surplus
war materials of World War II superfluous. "He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings...." (Daniel 2:21). It is He who also made an end to the world wars of our century.

However, the application goes still further.

During the rumours of war, Isaiah had made marvellous prophecies about God's coming Realm of Peace. This was to comfort the Remnant which had repented, but which had nonetheless suffered grievously under the misery of war. "It shall come to pass in the latter days", God had promised through Isaiah, "that they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:1-5; Micah 4:1-4; cf. Isaiah 11:1-10). Isaiah pointed to the end goal of God's geopolitics: the elimination of all violence and the destruction of all weapons of war. Is it possible that Isaiah and his followers, seeing the defeat of the political giant of their day, anticipated the day when all means of violence and war would be obliterated, including our missiles and bombs, a day when all imperialist powers would be brought low?\textsuperscript{33}

Verse 10:

Be still, and know that I am God.
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth!

These words were spoken by Yahweh himself. "Be still", He commanded majestically. But to whom was He speaking? We shall have to conclude He was addressing both His enemies and His covenant community.

"Be still" can be interpreted as a command levelled at Sennacherib. Nations had quailed at hearing the man's name, but now God decided to bring an end to the world war in general, and the attacks of Judah and Jerusalem in particular. The message was not mailed to Nineveh, of course, because Isaiah's prophecies about "the nations" was designed to bring comfort
to God's people.

The passage can also be interpreted as a direct admonition to Judah. It would tie in well with the key message proclaimed by the Isaiah-school: "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isaiah 30:15). In this case, the passage would be an affirmation of the levitical message of a radical break with diplomatic duplicity and reliance on quiet trust in Yahweh. This echoes the thrust of Psalm 2: the Kingdom of God is God's affair. We should not dismiss this as "too simple a truth", because in practice we often forget the command: "Be still, and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!"

Verse 11:

Yahweh of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Once more, the central message of Isaiah's "Immanuel circle" is heard: "If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established" (Isaiah 7:9).

Joy in communion with the Lord of hosts blends through relief at His intercession. Certainty of His help blends with trust for the future. Hope in the ultimate destruction of the violence of war mitigates the suffering and misery of war.

At the same time, the refrain serves as a reminder to the community that it must always be prepared to to sing this psalm. During the regime of Ahaz, many in Judah would have been hard put to confess the words of this psalm with a clear conscience. To them, Isaiah had said: "You have not remembered the Rock of your refuge" (Isaiah 17:10). The faith, "the Lord has founded Zion, and in her the afflicted of his people find refuge", remains a prerequisite for singing this psalm (Isaiah 14:32).

Without that faith, Psalm 46 can be dangerous.
5. Not a psalm for every occasion.

You may have observed that I do not consider Psalm 46 to have a general, or trans-historic, character. It was born in a particular historical situation, and was sung by the students of Isaiah. For that reason, it may be appropriated by the spiritual kin of Isaiah's "Immanuel-circle" living in a similar historical situation; it cannot be used by just anyone. Whoever forgets these historical roots and treats the psalm as a supra-temporal thesis with equal applicability for all times and places will have great difficulty with the meaning of the psalm. This will become clear from the following two historical illustrations which demonstrate clearly that God is not automatically always and under all circumstances, if His people turn away from Him, He can, in fact, turn against His church.

***

A century after the Assyrian invasion of Judah, it was threatened by yet another world power, Babylon. In this instance, the overwhelming majority of prophets called upon the people to have "faith" and "trust". Surely, they reasoned, Yahweh would not allow His Jerusalem to fall into Babylonian hands? "This is the temple of the Lord", they said, "the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord" (Jeremiah 7:4). Considered superficially, the prophets were appealing to Psalm 46: "God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved". Yet Jeremiah's message clearly contradicted this public opinion. According to him, these prophets were placing their "faith" in "deceptive words" (Jeremiah 7:4). God would destroy the house to which the false prophets appealed, "in which they trusted", and raze their beloved Shiloh, and, in the process, "cast out" these "pious" temple worshipers (Jeremiah 7:14ff.). In 586 B.C., Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar. The "faith" of the prophets and their following had been based on nothing.

Yet, they appeared to be very conversant with Psalm 46.

***
A second example is the Jewish War of A.D. 66-70. Again, Jerusalem was besieged, this time by the Romans. Its history was not committed to Scripture but was nevertheless prophesied by the Lord Jesus.

The Jews resisted with incredible religious fanaticism. To their dying breath they were convinced that God would help them, presumably relying on the assurances conveyed by Psalm 46. But in A.D. 70 captured the city. The war had cost 1,100,000 Jewish lives.

Clearly, they unjustifiably relied on Psalm 46’s promise: "God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved", just as their ancestors of 586 had. Why was the psalm applicable to the Assyrian situation, and not the Babylonian and Roman? Why was the confession "Yahweh of hosts is with us" not relevant in the last two cases?

Why in 701, and why not in 586 and A.D. 70??

Let's first look at the similarities.

In each case, God sent enemies to encircle the city; "does evil befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?" (Amos 3:6). In each case, too, the people might have known why this happened, because "surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). Before Sennacherib came, He had sent Isaiah to warn Judah of God's wrath in the form of the Assyrian threat. Before He sent Nebuchadnezzar, He had sent Jeremiah to warn his contemporaries of the coming wrath in the form of the Babylonians. Prior sending Vespasian and Titus, He had committed His counsel to His servant Jesus, who, for forty years, warned of the wrath to come (cf. Isaiah 10:5ff.; Jeremiah 1; Luke 21:22). Thrice God revealed His wrath in the form of a siege of Jerusalem, and thrice He had forewarned His people through His servants, the prophets.

***

Aside from the similarities, there is also a big difference.
When Jeremiah proclaimed that God had called the Babylonians to punish the people because of their sins, the majority would not listen. The intransigent Hananiah reinforced the Judeans' unbelief through seemingly "principial" and "faithful" proclamation: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon"; it would be all over in two years! (Jeremiah 28:2ff.). Instead of a call for humility under the wrath of God bringing severe judgment, he and his colleagues issued a call for "faith" in God's unconditional aid! Were they not God's people? Well then, what could happen? While God was very clearly against His people, they wanted to maintain that He was in reality for them, and appealed in the spirit of Psalm 46!

For nearly forty years, Jeremiah struggled against this unyielding, arrogant attitude of the Judaean church. While nearly everyone cursed Nebuchadnezzar as "heathen" and "enemy of the church", Jeremiah proclaimed God's Word that He had sent Nebuchadnezzar, His servant, to punish Judah! (Jeremiah 25:9).

"You have a harlot's brow, you refuse to be ashamed", Jeremiah told the people (Jeremiah 3:3; cf. 2:35, 5:3,23, 6:14ff., 7:26-28). "No man repents of his wickedness, saying, 'What have I done'" (Jeremiah 8:6, 19:15).

That marked a sharp contrast to Hezekiah's attitude.

***

During the Jewish War (66-70), Israel took the same arrogant attitude. The Lord Jesus had announced the siege of Jerusalem, the result of God's wrath because of their rejection of the Messiah (Luke 21:23). And, just as in the days of Jeremiah, no one repented of his evil, not even when an Israelite mother ate her own child, bringing into fulfillment Deuteronomy 28:57. "With God at our side, we laugh at your threats", the scornful Jews on the walls of Jerusalem called out to Titus. Have you noticed the false allusion of these proud fanatics to Psalm 46: "The Lord of hosts is with us"?

This event also marked a sharp contrast to Isaiah.

***
The events of 586 B.C. and A.D. 70 prove that the community is not always justified in raising Psalm 46. What applied to Hezekiah in 701 B.C. did not apply to Zedekiah in 586 B.C. In fact, an appeal to Psalm 46 during the crises of 586 B.C. and A.D. 70 amounted to false prophecy to a church under judgment. In both cases, a psalm created by the humble was used by the proud to taunt the living God. What is more foolish to sing, "God is with us", when it is clear that He is against His people? What is more disastrous than to claim He is fighting for our cause, when in fact, He has become an enemy, a devouring lion or bear? (Isaiah 63:10; Jeremiah 7:10; Hosea 13:7). Briefly, if the psalm is sung in times of judgment, and if the community will not humble itself before God's wrathful hand, the psalm becomes a false slogan which simply reinforces the community's lack of shame.

***

Decidedly, the psalm was not appropriate to Jeremiah's townsmen of Anathoth, who would just as soon have killed him (Jeremiah 11:21), nor to Pashhur, the chief officer in the temple, who had Jeremiah put in the stocks (Jeremiah 20:1-6), nor to Jeremiah's colleagues who, in the face of Jeremiah's judgment proclamation, continued to assert: "It shall be well with you, the people of Judah." (Jeremiah 23:17). They even thought Jeremiah deserved to die, because he has prophesied against this city" (that is, that God was not with her and would discipline her) (Jeremiah 26:11). One of the first exiles, Shemaiah of Nehelam, wrote a letter from Babylon to Zephaniah, the priest, urging the church to take disciplinary measures against Jeremiah, since the latter had written to exiles in Babylon: "Your exile will be long; build houses and live in them" (Jeremiah 29).

All these "believers" assured the people that "God is with us", while this was not true. On the contrary, Yahweh was extremely angry with His people. These priests delivered a message of "comfort" in time of judgment, while what was needed was a call to humility. ***
Much the same can be said of many Jews in A.D. 70. They had killed their own Messiah, and God had come to hold them to account. "Because you did not know the time of your visitation", the Saviour had told them (Luke 19:44). The things that made for their peace had been hidden from them (Luke 19:42). That peace would have come about if they had accepted the ultimatum delivered in God's name by John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand".

In such cases, Psalm 46 is to no avail. It sounds false in mouth of the "pious" proud.

The confession of faith of those who mourn in Zion.

But was Yahweh not angry with Judah in 701 B.C.? Had Isaiah not lamented Judah's faithlessness for years? Why, then, did God save Jerusalem under Hezekiah and not under Zedekiah in 586 B.C.? It's because Hezekiah's attitude differed substantially from those of Zedekiah in 586 B.C. and the Jews in A.D. 70.

Hezekiah humbled himself before Yahweh.

Although Hezekiah had valiantly purified the temple and restored the proper worship service, and had even removed the copper serpent, he also knew that Yahweh's justified wrath over Judah's betrayal of the covenant would not be so easily assuaged. His father Ahaz had even offered his children to Moloch and had placed an Assyrian altar in the temple (II Kings 16; II Chronicles 28). Yahweh had called Judah and Jerusalem "Sodom and Gomorrah" (Isaiah 1:10). Hence, Hezekiah considered it very possible that Yahweh was not with His Jerusalem.

He then showed the people how utterly a king can humble himself before Yahweh. As outward sign of his crushed spirit, he exchanged his royal robe for ugly sackcloth, symbol of mourning, and proceeded to God's royal palace, the temple. At the same time, he admitted the bankruptcy of his policies by sending an emissary, also dressed in sackcloth, to Isaiah, who for years had condemned his alliance-politics. To Isaiah, Hezekiah confessed: "This day is a day of rebuke". Filled with humility, he requested Isaiah to intercede for Jerusalem: "It may be that the Lord your God heard the words ...the king of Assyria has sent to
mock the living God" (Isaiah 37:4).

Hezekiah's attitude differed quite noticeably from those of his "pious" colleagues with their arrogant tongue and lack of shame. It also differed from the cold, proud spirit of resistance characteristic of the Maccabees, to which I'll return in discussing Psalm 74. Finally, it differed from those of the Jews in A.D. 70, who were blind to the causes of God's wrath. Hezekiah did not even appeal to his role as temple reformer; he was moved by the dishonour which had been brought to God's name, and accordingly asked God to spare Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:15-20).

As a result, Yahweh had compassion on Jerusalem and allowed the humble, such as Hezekiah, Isaiah and his following and all Judaeans who had repented and had returned to God and His service, to claim: "God is our refuge and strength". Psalm 46 belonged to them. Psalm 46 may be called the crowning jewel of chapters 1 through 37 of the book of Isaiah and one of the most splendid fruits of Isaiah's prophetic work.

Summarizing, for whom is Psalm 46 intended? Not for the proud, such as Pashhur, the men of Anathoth, Hananiah, the accuser Shemiah, the Maccabees or the Zealots of A.D. 70, but only for the "Immanuel-circle" and its spiritual kin of subsequent ages. Psalm 46 is the confession of faith of the contrite and humble in spirit, those who mourn in Zion (Isaiah 57:15).

6. A mighty fortress is our God.

Such a one was Dr. Martin Luther. "Come Philip," he must frequently have sighed to his friend, Melanchthon, "let's sing Psalm 46 once again". It was one of Luther's most dearly loved psalms. His hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God", is a poetic rendition of Psalm 46.

In all probability, Luther wrote this hymn when he was about to appear before Emperor Charles V at the Imperial Diet in Worms in 1521. He was probably stimulated by his own version, because he was not known to have been in a particularly heroic, triumphant spirit, despite the fact that he declared himself deter-
mined to go to Worms even if the devils there outnumbered the tiles on the rooftops. Speaking of devils, Luther clearly realized that his struggle was ultimately not against pope or emperor, but against the devil himself. As insignificant monk, he was confronted by the great lords of the world.

We know, from his humble petitions made in Worms, that he was genuinely a spiritual kin of the Isaiahic "Immanuel-circle": "Ach Gott, ach Gott, o du mein Gott. Du, mein Gott, stehe mir bei wider aller Welt Vernunft und Weisheit. Tue du es; du musz es tun, du allein!" Imagine his relief, following the conclusion of the Diet: "I've made it! I've made it through!"

Luther did not rely on his own strength. "Mit unserer Macht ist nichts getan, wir sind gar bald verloren", he sang in his composition of Psalm 46. The psalm must have been foremost on his mind in those days; the first thing he said when he descended from his coach in Worms was: "God will be with us!" The conclusion of his defense before the Diet. "God help me", together with his correspondence with his friends in these days, prove the impact of Psalm 46 on his faith: "God is our refuge and our strength".

Luther may have composed his hymn of Psalm 46 with poetic license, it is nevertheless clear that he had a good understanding of the psalm. In Worms, Luther faced the terrible, combined forces of state and church, but God intervened and the assault failed.

Only a few years later, the future of Christianity, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, seemed very uncertain indeed, when, in September of 1529, Turkish armies laid siege to the city of Vienna. There were three hundred thousand of them. With bated breath, all Europe anxiously awaited the outcome of this battle, which would decide the future of an entire continent. Did Luther and other humble Christians obtain renewed strength from the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God", based on Psalm 46? If so, they did not pray in vain. Just like in 701 B.C., God intervened. Without a doubt, one of the most important causes of the Turks' failure was the unusually inclement weather. Otherwise, the Mohammedans might easily
have subjugated the whole of European christianity, and we would have been born under the sign of the Half Moon, rather than under the baptismal sign of the Crucified One.

But then, there were many in the sixteen century who repented!

7. Psalm 46 in the global distress of our century.

"Wherever the body is, there the vultures will be gathered together", said our Saviour when He pronounced the doom of Jerusalem. Obviously, the prophecy initially refers to the events of A.D. 70. The Jewish church, because of its rejection of the Christ, was very similar to a carcass, which, according to our highest Prophet, would attract the vultures of God's judgment (Matthew 24:28).

Those who faithfully live out of God's Word today may detect a similar odour of decay emitted by our twentieth century christianity. Several times, the vultures of God's judgment have descended upon it. I have briefly touched on that. We have experienced two horrible world wars within three decades. Millions of soldiers and civilians have perished. Europe's strength has been dissipated.

Should we not see these events as continuations of the judgment which our Saviour pronounced on the apostate Jewish church in Matthew 24? Were these events stages of distress resulting from God's judgment which Jesus announced in Matthew 24:21? For the righteous today, the judgmental nature of these events is not an issue. They see that these events are judgments on the Greek, Roman, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican and Reformed churches everywhere.

Undoubtedly, the Lord has preserved many faithful, god-fearing righteous within these churches. But that was also true in the days of Jeremiah and the apostles. In absolute numbers, the Remnant may indeed be very large, a host innumerable. But relative to the whole of christendom and its hundreds of millions, the Remnant is probably quite small.

Will the Remnant remain vigilant and militant?
Who takes into account God's judgments?

"For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud
and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high", proclaimed
Isaiah to his contemporaries (Isaiah 2:12). Today, who fears
the coming of such a day, which will bring judgment upon a
paganized christianity? Many who genuinely fear the Lord appear
to be unaware of the coming of this Day. Many fail to see that
our times are remarkably similar to those of Jeremiah's times
or to A.D. 70. Accordingly, the lack the comfort of the message
concerning the Remnant and have no basis for their practical
life. Is that the reason so many christians are content to
mimic the ways of the world when it comes to, say, political
affairs?

If we are going to experience a new stage of distress of
which our Saviour spoke in Matthew 24:21,28, we shall have to
face its consequences: "Immediately after the tribulation of
those days...they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds
of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:29-31; Mark
13; Luke 17:26-37, 21:5-36). Which of us are prepared to in-
clude that great event in our scheduling and future plans?
During earlier catastrophies, such as the Napoleonic period,
many christians were prepared to do so...but now?

"And they did not repent...."

On Patmos, John saw that judgments in the form of wars
did not bring repentance (Revelation 9:20ff; cf. 16:9,11).
Was not this prophecy fulfilled again in our century? During the second world war, many christians refused to humble
themselves before God, but which history book writes about that?
Did most not blame Hitler, and look for their salvation to the
Anglo-American liberators? Had the arrogant Judaeans not done
the same thing when they cursed Vespasian and Titus, rather
than look to themselves? The voices of those who called for
humility under God's punishment were drowned by those who
loudly demanded their rights, which, admittedly, had been violated. Who acknowledged God's divine right to punish Christianity for its rejection of the blood of His Son and its scorn for His Holy Spirit? (Hebrews 10:29). Those who dared call attention to that were admonished to have more faith and reminded of Psalm 46! Even orthodox reformed christians appealed to God for help, in the face of God's judgment! This was exactly what had happened in the days of Jeremiah and the Zealots of A.D. 70! They, too, firmly believed that "God is with us", while, in fact, He was against them. "The wrath of God?" they would ask in astonishment, "but aren't we His people, orthodox and principial to boot?"

Psalm 46 is not for such false prophets.

Should western christianity --currently God's people-- ever become subjugated by a latter-day Sennacherib, would it be justified in seeking comfort from Psalm 46? Would self-sufficient christians be right in enlisting the aid of Psalm 46 by saying "God is always on the side of the christians"? The importance of this questions impelled me to bring it to your attention. Psalm 46 is no insurance policy protecting us from judgmental times. In the mouth of false prophets, Psalm 46 is denatured to false prophecy.

Psalm 46 is for today's "Immanuel-circle".

Of course, the psalm contains beautiful comfort for the present-day spiritual kin of men like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Psalm 46 is for the repentant Remnant which accepts co-responsibility for the guilt of western christendom, including its unrighteousness throughout history (cf. Ezra 9; Nehemiah 9; Daniel 9). It is for the Immanuel circle of our day which acknowledges God's divine right to chastise us and to turn us over to forces of evil, which, as modern-day Sennacheribs, overpower us and take from us the strength to resist them. Psalm 46 was written for those who recognize that world events are guided by the hand of God.
Such humble Christians may take comfort from Psalm 46. Psalm 46 does not guarantee that judgment will be averted. When the majority of Judah did not repent in 586 B.C., men like Ezekiel and Daniel did not escape the judgment. During times of judgment, the humble may be asked to suffer along with the proud. But that's where the prophets come in with their promises for the Remnant. One of those promises is the perspective on God's Realm of Peace.

"Therefore we will not fear", rejoiced the Korahites, "though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea" (Psalm 46:2). That was powerful poetic language, reflecting unlimited trust in God. The cosmic catastrophies listed in verse 2 shall undoubtedly await us at God's final judgment: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matthew 24:29). But also with regard to that the righteous may claim: "Therefore we will not fear... The Lord of hosts is with us...He makes wars cease to the end of the earth".

The password of the righteous may be: "Immanuel!"
PSALM 65: HUNGER AVERTED.

Psalm 65 is a real "summer-psalm".
Grain fields ripple in the wind. Summer fruit is ripening in the sun. Apples and pears are growing on the branches. Farmers are busy planning the harvest. It's a good time to sing Psalm 65. Judging from verses 9-13, that's where the psalm originated, at a time of year when promising harvests were ripening on Palestine fields. Their harvest comes before ours; they harvested their barley at Easter, their wheat at Pentecost. In August, they started picking their grapes.

However, Psalm 65, like the rest of Scripture, cannot be *generalized* removed from its historical context. Psalm 65 deals with a specific, historical summer, not just any summer. This psalm has a context which illumines all the verses of the psalm. The psalm even contains all the essential givens of the historical context; it should therefore not be too difficult to reconstruct the main theme.

1. After drought comes deliverance.
It may not be easy for us to imagine the background to Psalm 65. We have no shortages of grain, meat, fruit or fresh vegetables. Periods of drought do not affect us as drastically as the Israelite farmer. He lived in an entirely different world. It's delightful to have a few weeks without rain. Our faucets will still provide water and our cattle will not immediately die of thirst. But the western half of Palestine has no rivers, such as the tributaries of the Nile in Egypt. Pumps and plumbing were unknown in those days. The prosperity of an Israelite farmer depended entirely on rain and dew. Little wonder, then, that the rain blessing headed the whole list of blessings which Isaac gave to Jacob: "May God give you of the dew of heaven" (Genesis 27:28; cf. Deuteronomy 11:14, 28:12). The righteous Israelite knew that it was God who provided the rains. "Or can the heavens give showers? Art thou
not he, O Lord our God? We set our hope on thee, for thou doest all these things" (Jeremiah 14:22). The time in which the rains fell was also of crucial importance. The late rains, in March and April, were in any case indispensable for a successful harvest.

We have the impression from the psalmist, that weeks had passed since the last rainfall. The farmers searched the skies each day, but there was not a raincloud in sight.

In other words, disaster was at the door.

In various places, Scripture mentions the woeful effects of a prolonged drought (I Kings 17ff; Jeremiah 14; Amos 4:66ff; Haggai 1:11). No rain inevitably meant hunger, no grain, no bread, and no new seed for the following crops. An alternative was to let the bellies go hungry while the grain was "sown in tears" (cf. Psalm 126: "He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing"). Another result of a poor harvest was high prices, a black market, and exploitation by the grain dealers ("The people curse him who holds back grain", Proverbs 11:26). There were other dislocations: importing water from hither and yon; butchering of dying sheep and goats, together with its own effect; reduction of milk deliveries; dying beasts of burden; impoverished cattle; and always the burning sun, continually scorching and parching the land which needed to be worked for the coming sowing....

The source of all blessings was dry. What could the tortured people do in such an event? They had a choice of two possibilities. The first of these was to call in the help of Baal, the Canaanite god of rain and thunder.

In chapter 10, we saw that Baal worship formed an integral part of the Canaanite farmer's agricultural technology. According to ancient Canaanite faith, Baal and Astarte were two gods who delivered rain. And, as we've also seen, Baal worship had infiltrated the Israelite community during the times of the Judges and Kings.

I Kings 18 describes what took place at a Baal prayer service. There were many priests who continually cried out: "Baal, answer us! Baal, answer us!" They were trying to get Baal to dispense
rains from the heavens. Elijah's scornful remark, "perhaps he sleeps and needs to be awakened", refers to the legend that Baal was consigned to the realm of the underworld each year. (cf. § 10,1). But the Baal priests took Elijah's advice seriously apparently, because they "cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice; no one answered them, no one heeded" (I Kings 18:28ff.).

Self-inflicted woundings were apparently a custom. Spectacles such as the one on Mount Carmel must therefore have been a fairly common sight: hysterical, profusely bleeding priests, desperately shouting, "Baal, answer us!"

That was the first possibility: ignore God and call in Baal.

***

During the time when Psalm 65 was written, however, men chose a better way. There lived in the hearts of men the belief: "Does evil befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?" (Amos 3:6). They were undoubtedly reminded of what Yahweh had said in the Torah about rain and drought. "If you walk in my statutes ... then I will give you rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase... But if you will not hearken to me... then I will chastise you... and I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like brass; and your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit" (Leviticus 26; cf. Deuteronomy 28).

This throws a different light on a drought.

People began to ask themselves whether the drought was not the result of Israel's sins. They humbled themselves before the face of God who had brought the disaster. They bowed the knee, not simply to recognize that only He, and not Baal and Astarte, could avert disaster, but also to confess their sins before Him. Their eyes had been opened to the real cause of the drought: "our transgressions which7 prevail over us" (verse 3).
They were compelled by the honest and humble recognition that they had committed specific sins against God. They enumerated certain transgressions which they had been guilty of, and proceeded to ask God's forgiveness. In addition, they brought their praise (verse 1).

This, then, was the second possibility in case of drought. Israel of Psalm 65 chose the way of humility under the chastising hand of God.

What happened then?

They looked toward the skies with even more anxiety than before. Their faith was called to the test; they now had to wait on Yahweh, actually and figuratively. But then the rains came! It rushed through the trees and pattered on the rooftops. That was God's reply.

"By dread deeds thou dost answer us with deliverance."

And the fruitful spring came after all. Apparently, nature in Palestine can undergo a complete metamorphosis within an incredibly short time. One day it may be dusty and brown from drought, a land without colour or appeal, while the next, following some showers, nature is transformed as if by magic. All at once, hills and valleys will be covered with a profusion of fresh wild flowers. Purple, white, pink, yellow and red anemones, narcissi and clematis shrubs can be seen virtually everywhere. Almond trees will burst out in full bloom, standing like giant bridal bouquets.³

That was the miracle which took place during Psalm 65. The scorching winds, which had long abused the fields and the trees, made way for rainclouds and seawinds, which brought relief to the parched land. Man, animal and plant alike revived.

God had heard His people's prayers and crop failure was averted.

Thereupon, the Israelites left their homes to bring praise and thanksgiving to Yahweh. On such an occasion, the author of Psalm 65 may well have presented his song. Later, others may well have dedicated this psalm to their feasts of offering (Leviticus 7:16). In such a case, the psalm may have
been entitled "a psalm of vow-offering". (freewill or votive)

2. Verses 1-13: "It behooves us to sing thy praise on Zion's hill, O Lord!"

While Psalm 65 is a "summer-psalm", it may not arbitrarily be used for any summer. We should not generalize its application, but recognize its specific concreteness.

Verse 1:

Quiet is due to thee, O God, in Zion;
and to thee shall vows be performed.

Verse 1 is not general in its intent, a call to spend a few minutes each day in quiet meditation. We must read this verse in its context. The mighty hand of Yahweh had been heavy upon His people. At such a time, the Lord requires that man wait for Him quietly. The humble, who experienced great upheavals, knew this. When Yahweh had chastised His people with the rod of the Babylonian, the author of Lamentations wrote:

"The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when he has laid it on him; let him put his mouth in the dust -- there may yet be hope" (Lamentations 3:25-29). Ezra and "all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel" also knew of waiting quietly. All had gathered and sat appalled until the evening sacrifice (Ezra 9:3ff.).

Translations of verse 1 differ, but I feel that the translation "Quiet is due to thee, a song of praise O God, in Zion" is the most consistent with genuine biblical thought. Besides, it makes the most sense linguistically. In times of judgment, God requires silence from man. "Let man sit alone in silence", has Lamentations, "let him put his mouth in the dust". "Be still before the Lord", writes Psalm 37:7, "and wait patiently for him". (cf. Exodus 14:14; Lamentations 2:10; Amos 5:13).
The author of Psalm was acquainted with humble silence. This silence, quiet or stillness is diametrically opposed to the resistance to God's judgments, concerning which Moses had already prophesied and which fills the history of Old Israel and modern christendom (Leviticus 26:18,21,23,28,40).

Yet once the community has humbled itself and once Yahweh has responded to the community's silent waiting with deliverance as described in Psalm 65, it behooves the congregation to break the silence with songs of praise, because praise as well as quiet is due to Him. The vows, made in the distress, must then be redeemed. "Quiet is due to thee, a song of praise O God, in Zion; and to thee shall vows be performed".

Verse 2 begins the psalmist's praise.

Verse 2:
0 thou who hearest prayer!
To thee shall all flesh come
(on account of sins).

Following the threat of crop-failure and hunger averted, there was probably no name more appropriate for Yahweh than "thou who hearest prayer".

Some translations have "all living things" instead of "all flesh". The latter is more consistent with the original. "All flesh" emphasizes man's weakness as sinful mortal. Israelites bringing their votive offerings to God knew themselves to be weak, sinful mortals, who were incapable of bringing the rains and who, thorough their sins, had forfeited their right to God's blessing.

Verse 3:
When our transgressions prevail over us,
thou dost forgive them.

A notation in the R.S.V. shows that the Hebrew pronoun is actually "me", not "us". In all probability, the pronoun "me" has the force of "us", since it refers to Israel as a unified entity. The use of "me" is similar to that in Psalm 129: "Let Israel now say -- !Sorely they
Following this collective confession of guilt, Yahweh fulfilled the promise of Leviticus 26: "But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers..., then I will remember my covenant with Jacob" (verse 40ff.). The Hebrew word for "iniquity" and "transgressions" is the same in both instances. But the rains had proven to the Israelites that Yahweh was angry no longer. He would forgive their iniquity; that was evident from the facts.

It proved once again that Yahweh will not abandon those of contrite spirit who patiently wait for him. "For this says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite" (Isaiah 57:15; cf. v. 18).

And the Israelites were astonished at God's goodness!

Verse 4:

Blessed is he whom thou dost choose and bring near, to dwell in thy courts!
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house, thy holy temple!

Freewill- or votive-offerings belonged to the category of peace-offerings, of which the Israelite could eat a large portion himself. "The special character of the peace-offering was the paradisaic element it contained. The peace-offering was intended to instruct and assure Israel concerning the promise of the splendid future which would feature peace between God and His people...The peculiar character of the peace-offering became evident in the meal which always followed the offering, a meal which was presented by God, as host, to the Israelite, His guest. This did not happen with any other offerer" (cf. Leviticus, ). We should be careful not to allegorize phrases such as "being filled with the goodness of Thy house", because that referred specifically to the
feast of freewill-offering.

We should try to visualize such an event.

Festive Israelites are seated for the meal of freewill offering, relieved that God had answered their prayers and vows by averting crop-failure. On the great altar of burnt offering, a priest had forgiven their sins in name of Yahweh. The colours and floral bouquets of the tabernacle, together with the priestly garb, declared to them Yahweh's promises of righteousness, holiness and eternal life. The screen surrounding the court was a visible sign that Yahweh had chosen them, from among all the peoples, to be His own people. Such indescribable grace! They knew themselves to be "blessed" compared to all nations who did not yet know Yahweh (cf. Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2; Psalm 147:20; cf. Genesis-Exodus, ).

Verse 4 reflects the impact of the Horeb covenant. Under the New Testament, God has also chosen us, formerly heathens, to be His covenant partners. Today, we may approach God without the intercession of the Levitical priesthood, because Jesus is our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16). We can now read Psalm 65 in the light of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (verse 3ff.).

Verse 5:

By dread deeds thou dost answer us with deliverance,
0 God of our salvation,
who art the hope of all the ends of the earth,
and of the farthest seas;

The heavens may have been of iron and the ground of copper during the prolonged drought, but once the Israelites had observed their prayer-and penitence-days, Yahweh readily sent the rains of deliverance. Had He not answered with "dread deeds and proven His faithfulness to the Horeb covenant? Had He not honoured the covenant's terms? Blessing would result from obedience, as the
curse would follow disobedience. Salvation, or deliverance, would come with humility and repentance (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28).

In fact, people around the world rely on His seasons, His rains, His sunshine. Whether consciously or not, people base their economies on God's steadfast pledge He gave to Noah, including atheistic economies with their five-year plans.

Verse 6 and 7:

who by thy strength hast established the mountains, being girded with might;
who dost still the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.

Living in mountainous terrain, close to the hostile Great Sea, the imagery of verses 6 and 7 was particularly dear to the Israelite. "Establishing mountains" and "stilling the seas" were words of reassurance to him. Those are factors which even modern technology cannot control. The Swiss have their tunnels, the Dutch their Delta-works, but they are trivia when compared to the works of God. Mountains and oceans are still symbols of God's might. One word from Him and oceans would cover the globe. Even the hugest of dams and dikes would not avail. One tidal wave would erase man's mightiest fabrications.

Just as He rules the oceans of the world, He controls the tumultuous nations. The psalm gives the impression that in those days the tumult of the nations had subsides somewhat. The psalmist did not credit it to progressive political developments, however, but to the hand of Yahweh.

Verse 8:

so that those who dwell at earth's farthest bounds are afraid at thy signs;
thou makes the outgoings of the morning and the evening to shout for joy.

Israel's neighbours may also have suffered from the drought. According to the psalmist, their shouts of joy were also a gift of
Yahweh. He had brought joy from East to West, a truth which did not depend on whether or not it was recognized by other nations.

Who brought joy to the nations in the summer of 1945? Who stilled the tumult of the nations? Was it England, or America? Or was it the living God? Though men may not see it that way, it's the truth nonetheless.

Now the crops stand ripening in the fields. The poet is amazed. The grain stirs gently in the breeze. Pastures are filled with herds. What had appeared to be a disastrous year, Yahweh had turned into a year of prosperity.

**Verses 9-13:**

Thou visitest the earth and waterest it,  
thou greatly enrichest it;  
the river of God is full of water;  
thou providest their grain,  
for so thou hast prepared it.

Thou waterest its furrows abundantly,  
settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers,  
and blessing its growth.

Thou crownest the year with thy bounty;  
the tracks of thy chariot drip with fatness.

The pastures of the wilderness drip,  
the hills gird themselves with joy,  
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
they shout and sing together for joy.

A portrait of Palestine in the spring.

It was a spring for which Israel had pleaded with humility and guilt-confession, with vows and silent waiting. It was also a spring in which Israel brought bountiful praise to Yahweh. It is a testimony of faith in a religious environment dominated by the nature religions of Baal and Astarte. Israel knew itself to be a people of "flesh", weak and sinful mortals contrasted to an almighty God. But even twentieth century man has not learned to harness the rains.

Living in an age of science-worship, we must praise our heavenly Father for our successful harvest, just as the Israelite
did in times of universal nature religions.

To praise God for these things is to confess Him! "Are there any among the false gods of the nations that can bring rain?" Can our modern engineers and physicists bring rain? "Art thou not he, O Lord our God? We set our hope on thee, for thou doest all these things" (Jeremiah 14:22).
June 1520. Villa Malliano, the papal summer palace. Hunts, tournaments and dramatic presentations have been scheduled.

In the meantime, the papal legates meet in Rome. The highest echelon of the church hierarchy deliberates and prepares a papal bull against the troublesome German monk, Martinus Luther. The council rejects forty-one of Luther's "heresies". They give him sixty days to recant.²

Pope Leo X had attended the opening session of the hearing. But after one day, he had decided to retire to his papal estates for "the customary hunt". On June 15, the bull was presented to him for endorsement. His Holiness had only to add a preface and conclusion for the bull to become official. The introductory remarks lead one to suspect that his mind was already preoccupied with the beloved wild boar hunt. When the "vicar of Christ" attempted to articulate his "pain" at having thus to fulfill his papal responsibilities, he thought to detect inspiration in Psalm 80! "Exsurge, Domine!" the title of the encyclical, which is Latin for "Arise, Lord!" "Arise, Lord, and take this matter into hand! A wild boar is ravaging your vineyards!"³

Odorous eisegesis? Indeed, but in one respect, Leo was right: Psalm 80 laments the devastation wrought among the people of God, the realm of the church. The mediaeval church had indeed been ravaged and pillaged.

The question was: who really was the wild boar?

1. Historical background.
Psalm 80 is a psalm of lamentation concerning Israel, or the Ten Tribes. The psalmist also called it "Joseph" (verse 1) and "Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh" (verse 2). Following the fall of Samaria, the Assyrians had taken these northern tribes of Israel into exile (722 B.C.).

How the Ten Tribes had tormented Yahweh prior to that! Nebat's son, Jeroboam, had led Israel into sin and had started his own self-willed religion, Yahwehist calf-worship in Dan and Bethel. Yahweh had already warned him through the prophet Ahijah that the end of his apostasy would be exile: "The Lord will...root up Israel out of this good land which he gave to their fathers , and scatter them beyond the Euphrates" I Kings 14:15ff.). And yet it was another two hundred years before the actual exile took place. During this time, Yahweh sent myriads of prophets with the same warning. The books of Kings demonstrate how Yahweh repeatedly attempted to save recalcitrant Ephraim. Elijah and Elisha working in Ephraim (the Ten Tribes). God carefully prepared their messages of warning. And many more prophets, whose names we do not know, were sent to proclaim God's coming wrath. But God's punishment on Israel intensified with each passing chapter of the book of Kings. Bears were sent to maul children (II Kings 2). There was war with Moab (II Kings 3). There was famine (II Kings 4). There were on-going conflicts with the Syrians and Arameans. The carried away Israel's children, such as the servant girl to Naaman's wife (II Kings 5). The Syrians besieged Samaria for such a long time that emaciated women ate their own children (II Kings 6ff.). But after all God's warnings had been spurned and all reformations had been stonewalled because of the disinterest of most people, Yahweh finally, after two hundred years, carried out the threat He had proclaimed to king Jeroboam I. He finally sent the cruel Assyrians to accomplish His task (cf. § 13, Psalm 46).

The Assyrians first crossed Israelite borders under the rule of Menahem (II Kings 15:19ff.). It cost Israel one thousand talents of silver to buy off the invader (for value of talent,
'see Numbers—Deuteronomy, (footnote 4). "In the days of Pekah, king of Israel Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Jano-ah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried the people captive to Assyria" (II Kings 15:29). When Hoshea, Israel's last king, refused to pay tribute, "the king of Assyria shut him up, and bound him in prison. Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Samaria, and for three years he besieged it. In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes", a long way from home, near the Caspian Sea (II Kings 17:1-6).

Psalm 80 probably originated in the last days of the church of the Ten Tribes, according to the inscription of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (cf. Genesis—Exodus). The inscription reads "Concerning the Assyrian". There is no reason to doubt its accuracy, because the psalm fits perfectly in the historical background.

It is not possible to determine exactly which king ruled or when during the Assyrian suzerainty the psalm was written. They were all years in which Yahweh fed His apostate Ephraim "bread of tears" (Psalm 80:5). It is safe to conclude, with the Septuagint, that the psalm dates from the time when the Assyrian mailed fist was constantly on Israel, had been, in fact, since the days of king Menahem (752-742). The psalm could have been written during any of those thirty years, from 752 until 722, when Assyria became the instrument in God's hand and deported the Ten Tribes.

A poet from among the Remnant.

Yahweh maintained a Remnant, which continued to fear Him, even through the dark days of church history (II Chronicles 30:11, 18, 25, 34:9). Prophets such as Hosea, Amos, Jonah, and Micah prophesied to Israel and Samaria and, while the response was not impressive, there were some who turned to Yahweh.
Anyway, the faithful in Judah at this time also formed only a small minority, a Remnant. Isaiah, who personally witnessed the demise of Samaria, only sixty kilometers away, called one of his own sons, Sear Jashub, meaning "a Remnant shall return".

At any rate, one of the Remnant became an intercessor before God of the plight of the Ten Tribes. Did the author of Psalm 80 live in Ephraim? That's possible, considering the nature of his appeals: "Restore us, O God...that we may be saved", which is repeated three times. He may also have been a Judaean showing solidarity with his believing brothers in Israel, together with whom they all formed one, indivisible covenant nation. The inscription, "A Testimony of Asaph", seems to suggest a Judaean, but it's quite possible that a few Asaphites were still living in Israel --despite II Chronicles 11:13ff. Whether the author was a Northerner or Southerner is impossible to say, but it's certain that he belonged to the godfearing Remnant, who turned to Yahweh for compassion during the judgment of Assyrian oppression.

2. Verses 1-19: O God, Thy Vineyard!

Verse 1:

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
thou who leadest Joseph like a flock!
Thou who art enthroned upon the cherubim,
shine forth.

When father Jacob pronounced the blessings on his sons, he said to Joseph, a collective name used by Psalm 80 for the Ten Tribes, "his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel" (Genesis 49:24).

The shepherd was a traditional symbol in Palestine. It's remarkable that the author begins his appeal for Joseph by addressing Yahweh with the intimate title used by Jacob, "Shepherd of Israel". It is equally striking that he confesses his own faith with the apposition, "who art enthroned upon the cherubim", above the ark containing the charters of the ancient
Sinai covenant. He does not appeal to a god sitting above the
calf-images in Dan and Bethel, which the majority in Israel
would have done, having grown accustomed to doing so for the
previous two centuries! Yahweh sat enthroned in the House which
Solomon had built for Him in Jerusalem! The address testifies to
the courageous faith of the god-fearing Remnant.

He did not condescend pharisaistically to 'the mass, who
do not know the Law", but intercedes for his unfaithful brothers.
After all, the Ten Tribes were also the "sheep and lambs" of
the Shepherd of Israel. Could the Shepherd continue to turn a deaf
ear to the flock, which for centuries He had shepherded? If He
would only "shine forth", as He had in days of yore...!

The time was certainly becoming critical. From both a ci-
vilian and military standpoint, the situation in Israel was
hopeless. What could that ravaged rump which made up the Ten
Tribes hope to accomplish against the Assyrian super-power?
The god-fearing in both South and North saw only one escape:
God's intervention.

Verse 2:

Stir up thy might,
for Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh!
and come and save us!

Yahweh only had to command His famous, heroic liberating
power and Israel would be saved. Urgently, the appeal went out:
Please, God, use your might to deliver the stricken land of
Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh and redeem us!

I briefly discussed the use of the plural "us". If the
author of Psalm 80 was not an Ephraimite, but a levite living
in Judah, he did not look down proudly upon his faithless
brothers in the North. He knew himself to be one with them,
bond together in a communal past with communal promises and
communal curses established by God in the covenant. If, in fact,
he did belong to the Remnant in the Ten Tribes, he certainly
did not intend to isolate himself from his faithless brothers,
seeing as how he felt himself tied to them communally.

It means that it is perfectly appropriate for us to address ourselves communally to the desolate conditions which frequently befall the whole of modern christianity. It is consistent with Psalm 80 to pray, "May God be gracious unto us ", meaning the whole of christendom. The unity of the covenant and baptism places us all on the foundation of His promises and under the doom of His requirements and admonitions.

Verse 3:

Restore us, O God;
let thy face shine, that we may be saved!

The psalmist prays for the restoration of Israel, for grace for God's people. This is clear from: "let thy face shine", as a petitioner could see from the light in the king's eye that his petition had been granted and that he had been granted mercy. It is similar to the priestly blessing, "Yahweh cause His face to shine upon you", which is immediately followed by: "and give you peace". Israel's deliverance, in other words, is a matter of grace and restoration, accomplished by Yahweh. If only Yahweh would turn aside His dark anger and look upon His people with gracious light, the abominable Assyrian yoke would be quickly removed.

There is no other way to effect "church restoration", according to the Law and the Prophets. If people are blind to the faithlessness of the church, both past and present, and if they do not plead for God's grace, resulting in His gift of restoration, the church can then not be saved. Any other attempts will only be temporary patch-work.

Verse 4:

O Lord God of hosts,
how long wilt thou be angry with thy people's prayers?

Scripture knows about the power of the Lord's hosts, with which He conducts His battles. He employed them during the
Exodus from Egypt and the Entry into Canaan. Powerful forces of nature can be recruited. Egypt was terror-stricken under their impact. Mount Sinai shuddered under their might. River Jordan was paralysed and stood still. The heathens native to Palestine long remembered the forces unleashed by the hosts of the Lord during this half-century following liberation from Egypt (Psalms 68 and 114). God had cosmic weaponry at His disposal.

Now, this Supreme Majesty focussed His wrath on Israel! Like other "psalms of lamentation concerning the church", Psalm 80 focusses attention on God's hand and His wrath, and does not dwell on the Assyrians. It does not "operate simply on a human level". To the psalmist, the razed and ravaged countryside and cities was not primarily the work of the Assyrians. In first instance, it was God who was doing this to the unrighteous Ephraimites. He was avenging himself for their abominable Baal-worship and other form of covenant oath-breaking, in which they had persisted, even though He had sent innumerable prophets to point out to them the error of their ways. The question was: how long would Yahweh's anger continue to burn? Would it continue to seethe despite the intercessions of the faithful Remnant? Had their prayers been consumed by His fury before they had reached His ears?

It is striking that the psalmist still calls the apostate tribes "Your people"! On the eve of their deportation! We must realize that he was talking about the Israel of Ahab and Jezebel, the land of Baal's high places and the people who had broken God's covenant, despised His commandments, displeased Him, ignored the words of the prophets, sneered at Elisha and bowed the knee to sun, moon and stars (II Kings 17). These are all signs of what the Belgic Confession (29) calls the "false church". The psalmist, however, still called them "Your people", Your sheep", " Your vine", Your son, which You have raised" and "the stock which your right hand has planted". Scripture here teaches us how long we must continue to speak of wayward sheep as "sheep". They may be wayward, they may even be lost, but they are sheep nevertheless. They may be under God's wrath, but they
are still "God's people"!

It's precisely the fact that they are God's sheep which accounts for God's severe anger. Fathers in general do not become angry if their neighbour's children choose not to be with them, but only if their own sons desert them. That can enrage a father! Similarly, God's wrath is much more severe to christians who leave His presence than to heathens.

Verse 5:

Thou hast fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.

Here, too, the psalmist uses the plaintiff tone to arouse Yahweh's sympathy. Humbly, he admits that God rules the nations and that it was He who sent the cruel Assyrian to Israel (Isaiah 7:18). It was God who permitted the Assyrian troops to kill and to plunder. He had given the Israelites "tears to drink in full measure". There were tears for disintegrated families, ruined homes and cities, tears for hunger, misery, despair, destruction, sorrow and grief. To the psalmist, it was God's chastising hand which had brought this about: "Thou hast done all this!"

Verse 6:

Thou dost make us the scorn of our neighbors;
and our enemies laugh among themselves.

Here was an opportunity for Israel's neighbors to humiliate Israel. They fought like vultures for Israel's carcass. One moment it was the army of one nation, the next it was another, which came to despoil Israel. Their words of sarcasm and sneering faces cut the faithful to the bone. It may be that people of those times and places felt the pain more acutely than we would. But even this grief was brought on the Ten Tribes by the hand of God. The psalmist knew it. Had God not warned Israel, long ago, through Moses? (Deuteronomy 28:37).

Verse 7:

Restore us, O God of hosts;
let thy face shine, that we may be saved!
This refrain, which concluded the first part of the psalm, is used again to conclude the second. Again this cry for help.

Verse 8:

Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt;
thou didst drive out the nations and plant it.

Forgetting God's covenant often go hand in hand with forgetting God's deeds in our past. Everyone can observe that from his own surrounding. The author of Psalm 80, however, was not such a superficial, unhistoric person. Just like the poet of Psalm 74, a psalm of Asaph, he proceeds to remind Yahweh of His glorious past. Perhaps, he feels, Yahweh will yet rescue Israel if he reminds Him of the great work of "establishing the Israelite world" (cf. Numbers -Deuteronomy; Psalm 74:2). He uses an image borrowed from the vineyard: planting a vine. In biblical times, these grew everywhere in Canaan. The soil and climate of Palestine are ideally suited for vineyards. In ancient times, the wine industry was probably more common than today. How often does Scripture not mention wine? Possibly, the poet alluded to Genesis 49:22, where Jacob blessed his son Joseph --a collective name used here for the Ten Tribes-- with the following: "Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall". Possibly also, the poet knew Hosea's prophecy: "Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased the more altars he built" (Hosea 19:1). Jeremiah would later use the same image: "Yet I planted you a choice vine" (Jeremiah 2:21).

It's as though the psalmist wanted to say: "Do you remember, Yahweh, how you saved us from Israel, and how you scattered the Canaanites before us and planted us a a choice vine in this good land?"

We, as christians who have come out of heathendom, associate such thoughts with the historic redemption of European peoples out of the darkness of heathendom and their entry into the light of the Gospel (Acts 26:18; Ephesians 2, 5:8; I Peter 2:9ff.).
What was Israel's redemption from Egypt is our redemption from Germanic heathendom; it was like being taken up out of the grave.

Scripture here teaches all intercessors acting on behalf of the distress of christianity in our time how they can still reach God's heart when He visits His people with judgment: they should remind Him of His historic and fundamental acts of redemption. In order to do that, however, we must experience the biblical solidarity which unites all generations in God's one and only covenant. This solidarity enabled the psalmist to base his plea on God's historic redemption: was God really planning to destroy His greatest work? The same solidarity led the author of Psalm 79 to his plea: "Do not remember against us the iniquities of our forefathers" (verse 8a).

Verses 9-11:
Thou didst clear the ground for it;  
it took deep root and filled the land.  
The mountains were covered with its shade,  
the mighty cedars with its branches;  
it sent out its branches to the sea,  
and its shoots to the River.

In a few succinct sentences, the psalmist portrays God's compassionate care for the weak root, which is Israel. When the people had entered Canaan, God had already prepared the ground. Israel's existence was assured. Thanks to Yahweh, the small plant took root immediately and expanded into a giant vine whose branches reached from the Mediterranean Sea to the river Euphrates. That, at least, had been the boundaries of the kingdoms of David and Solomon. Their rule extended from Egypt along the Mediterranean coast to the Euphrates. Not without fear did other nations look upon Israel.

That's how it was; but what was it like now?

Verses 12 and 13:
Why then hast thou broken down its walls,  
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?  
The boar from the forest ravages it,  
and all that move in the field feed on it.
This lines give a poetic image of Israel after it had been severely shattered by Assyria. The metaphor has been changed from a single vine to a vineyard or a mountainside covered with vineyards. Such a hillside vineyard needed to be walled, in order to prevent soil erosion from the terraced vineyards. The wall also served to keep out the cattle which would otherwise trample the vines (Jeremiah 12:10). It also kept our boars or passers-by who might otherwise be tempted to eat the fruit. 10

The boar is a very effective metaphor to describe the terrible assaults and atrocities of the Assyrians. The wild boar is much more violent and agile than the domesticated pig. The wild boar "breaks through fences and walls, disturbs the soil, tears down the vines and tramples them under foot. Only a few of them would be enough to obliterate an entire vineyard. The boar is very large, often resembles a mule more than a pig, and is astonishingly agile. The inhabitants of the land where boars are common would much rather face a lion than a boar, whose razor-sharp tusks can rend open the body of a horse or cut a dog in half with one fierce swoop." 11 The psalmist compared the Assyrians with such an animal. And the boar-hunting pope Leo X compared the reformer Martin Luther to such a boar....

Above all, however, the psalmist focused on God.

God himself had broken down the wall surrounding the vineyard which was Israel. It gave every passer-by an opportunity to pick its grapes. Neighboring states, which had formerly paid tribute to Israel, now came to plunder the defenseless land. The mighty Assyria had descended upon Israel like a wild boar and had devoured its fruits. It deprived the old Ten Tribes of its gold, its harvest, its people and its cattle. But why had Yahweh removed Israel's wall?

As Christians, we should remind ourselves that we are still dealing with the same God. We can enrage Him to the point that He will tear down the walls of His own vineyard (Christendom), permitting everything and everyone to infiltrate the church. Strange doctrines. Theories of unbelief. Religiosity outside
Word and covenant considerations. Secularization. Relapses into heathen ways of life. Should we not ask whether God himself has razed the wall of the church through the destructive doctrine of evolution? Does christianity not resemble the denuded and defoliaged vineyard? Yet who sees the hand of God in all this? Do we not have every reason to echo the profound query of the psalmist: Has God deserted us? Is He in the process of withdrawing His Spirit and Word from us?

Verses 14-16:

Turn again, O God of hosts!
Look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
the stock which thy right hand planted.
They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of thy countenance!

What had the Assyrians not put to the torch? They had plundered, murdered and pillaged at will. Was the shoot from the days of Joshua, which became the flourishing vine in the days of David and Solomon, not very much like worthless stubble, to be thrown in a heap and burned? Did Yahweh still see the misery of His people, or had He distanced himself from Northern Israel? If only the God of hosts would turn from His wrath! Could He endure the terrible, grievous condition which had befallen His beloved vineyard? Did He not remember that He had planted this root, with His own "jamin", or right hand? (The poet's allusion to Ben-jamin is striking). Did Yahweh not remember that He had instructed Moses to command the Egyptian Pharaoh: "Let my son go...!" (Exodus 4:23). Was it His plan to abandon His son the the Assyrians? Could His divine compassion absorb that?

Today's intercessors may thus speak to God about the distressing situation within the vineyard of christianity. They may ask Him to consider the broken-down walls, in the hope of moving His sorrowed heart to compassion. This is what the author of Lamentations did following the fall of Jerusalem: "Look, O Lord,
and see! With whom hast thou dealt thus?" (Lamentations 2:20).
We should not expect assurances, guaranteeing an end to the judgment, but, as Lamentations wrote: "there may yet be hope" (Lamentations 3:29).

Verse 17:

But let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, the son of man whom thou hast made strong for thyself!

Some have linked "son of man" to a specific king, such as Josiah or Hoseah, but why does a king have to appear in a prayer for the people? The whole psalm is about God's people, represented in various symbolic images (root, vine, vineyard, son). The phrase "man of thy right hand" may well be an allusion to the name Benjamin. II Samuel 20:1 has is jemineka for Benjamineite. Verse 17 has is jemineka for "man of thy right hand". In this respect, verse 17 is about the tribe of Benjamin, rather than about a particular king.

"O God", pleads the psalmist in verse 17, "protect your Benjamin. He is so weak; truly a man-child, a ben-adam, made of the dust. He is just a mortal being, who cannot live without your divine protection. Intervene, we pray, on his behalf and save him from themighty Assyrian."

Verse 18:

Then we will never turn back from thee; give us life, and we will call on thy name!

If, because of infidelity, a Near Eastern High King dethroned his vassal, he was said to have"slain" him, even though he may not actually have killed him. It may be said, accordingly, that the Egyptian pharaoh Neco "slew" Jehoahaz (II Kings 23: 31-34). If the dethroned king was later restored to the throne, he was said to have "come alive". This also applied to his subjects: if the king was removed from office, both he and his people were dead. If he was restored, both he and his people lived again.
As a rule, the restoration involved renewal of the covenant. The lord-vassal agreement, which had been broken was sealed once again. This often happened on the third day (cf. Hosea 6:2). Psalm 80:18 is reminiscent of this covenant terminology.

Israel had revolted against Yahweh, its lawful High King. It had thereby committed high treason. The High King, Yahweh, had subsequently sent His emissary Hosea with the following message: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge [that is, agreement with a legitimate covenant partner; recognition of the High King (cf. § 5 re-Psalm 1:6)...Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of my mouth" (Hosea 4:6, 6:5). The same Hosea was also God's emissary to bring to Israel the promise of life, should they repent (Hosea 6:2, 13:14; cf. Psalm 85:7; Ezra 9:8).

Psalm 80:18 has the same covenantal language. Small wonder, because it has the same historical background as the book of Hosea. In terms of covenantal nomenclature, Israel and his people were already "dead". If the High King wished, however, He could restore them to life. That was the psalmist's appeal. "Restore us..., give us life; then we shall never leave You again," said the psalmist, "we shall never call on the Baals again, but only on Your name!"

Verse 19:

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts!
let thy face shine, that we may be saved!

Once more, he raises his plea. Thrice he had asked: "Restore us". Thrice he had pleaded: "let thy face shine". He now ends his petition with the cry: "Restore us...let thy face shine".

Has the Shepherd of Israel granted the psalmist's petition? Did He indeed cause His face to shine, and did He reverse himself? He did, even though it took several centuries for Him to do so.

As I mentioned earlier, Isaiah personally witnessed the demise of the Ten Tribes from a distance of roughly sixty kilometers. He also witnessed the fact that king Ahaz of Judah had asked the Assyrians to attack Ephraim (II Kings 16:7; Isaiah 7; cf. § 13,1). Were there at that time Judaeans who
dared ridicule the stricken brotherhood in the North? "Our enemies laugh among themselves", verse 6 had complained. Were those enemies Judaean brothers who were delighted when the Assyrian assaults came upon Israel? The Holy Spirit also showed Isaiah a different future for poor Ephraim. Just in case Judaean revellers in the despair of the North, Yahweh also proclaimed: "But there will be no gloom for her that was in anguish when the cruel Assyrian marched into Israel. In the former time he (that is, God; that's how Psalm 80 saw it) brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness have light shined upon them has light shined" (Isaiah 9:1ff.). Matthew, the apostle who focussed primarily on the conversion of the Jews to Jesus, quoted these words of Isaiah and considered them to have been fulfilled in Christ (Matthew 4:14ff.).

Where else did Christ's light shine as it did in Galilee? The light shone most brilliantly in the dark North, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali with its small cities of Nazareth, Capernaum and Chorazin. God sent His angel Gabriel here, because here lived the "most blessed among women", Mary, the mother of the Lord. In the North, in the village of Nain, Jesus dispelled the shadow of death, when He called back to life the widow's son. "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Where else than in Galilee did people have the opportunity to behold this light? It was the land for which Psalm 80 interceded. It was also the land to which the grieving disciples were sent to meet their risen Master (Matthew 28:7).

3. Back to Pope Leo and Martin Luther.

On June 15 1520, pope Leo X interrupted his race tournaments and dramatic presentations at his summer castle in Malliano to
pen an introduction and conclusion to his new encyclical aimed at the "heretic" Martin Luther. If Luther would not recant within two months, the papal bull would be announced. As I said earlier, the introduction to the bull alluded to Psalm 80: "Arise, O Lord --Exsurge, Domine!--, a wild boar has ravaged your vineyard!" The "holy father", who had just returned from the hunt, saw the wild boar a perfect example of the German monk, Dr. Martin Luther. To Leo, Luther's blind destruction of the church was similar to a boar in a carefully tended vineyard.

To Luther, it was just the other way around: not he, but the pope, the spokesman of church-destroying forces, was the wild boar which had violated the sanctity of the church. On November 17, 1520, Luther responded to the papal bull with his own declaration, which bore the not so subtle title Adversus execrabilem Antichristi bullam ("Against the damnable bull of the Antichrist").

Despite the fact that pope Leo and Martin Luther were antagonists in this conflict, they had one thing in common: both saw Psalm 80's relevance for the Christian church of their day. They heard Psalm 80 proclaim its message within the walls of their church. Do we hear its voice in our time? As the church today loses in faithfulness, the psalm gains in relevance. I want to discuss that relevance further in the next volume. The vineyard of Christianity is being increasingly assaulted by the "wild boars" of misdirected biblical criticism, gnosticism and other movements which undermine church and faith. How better to learn God-pleasing intercession than in the school of "Zion's psalms of lamentation"?

However, those who are blind to the wisdom of God's covenantal circle and the devastation inflicted in the vineyard of Christianity by these "wild boars" may dismiss these psalms as antiquated "oldtestamental" artifacts. But those whose eyes are opened by God's Spirit to the prophesied calamity will see in the likes of Psalm 80 examples par excellence of petitions and intercessions on behalf of God's vineyard today.