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Singing a New Song

It is difficult for us to grasp the sense of shock the opening of Genesis would have conveyed to its first hearers and readers. We are so familiar with its contents and cadences that it strikes us as perfectly natural, a kind of 'given'. But while the Ancient Near East was familiar with creation myths, and a number of narratives of such creations have come down to us, from Ugarit and Egypt and elsewhere, these were always in verse, and they always entailed ferocious battles between the gods until one emerged as the supreme deity. By contrast the quiet, regulated prose of the biblical account, in which God speaks and the orderly world of light and dark, sea and land, beasts, birds and fish comes into being, is shocking in its very restraint and dignity.

This does not last, of course, but the use of prose does, and, as scholars like Cassuto and Alter have demonstrated, it is not an arbitrary choice but intimately bound up with the unique Hebrew conception of a single creator God, to whom all is subservient, including the chaotic sea and even death itself, but whose relation to mankind, and in particular to his chosen people, the Israelites, is that of a loving father, protective, yet just; slow to anger yet tolerating no dissimulation and no evasion of responsibility.

Given this central place of prose and of simple consequential narration, the next big shock to the reader or hearer would have come in the middle of Exodus. We have had a detailed account of the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt, of the rise of Moses, of his leading the people out of Egypt and of the sudden destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Sea of Reeds, while before the Israelites the waters parted and they crossed over as on dry land:

And Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses. Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea [*ashir le'adonai ki ga'oh ga'ah sus verokeku ramah bayam*] (Exod.14:31-15:1)

There had, it is true, been moments of poetry in the narrative up to then: the brief outburst of Lamech, the extended death-bed utterance of Jacob, blessing his sons, but *song* is something new. And it does not occur very frequently in the remainder of the Bible. There is the Song of Deborah in Judges, and there are formal laments, such as the lament of David over Saul and Jonathan, which one can imagine being set to music. Poetry takes over from prose as the main vehicle for the prophetic utterances and for many of the *ketubim* or miscellaneous collection of pieces which make up the last portion of the Hebrew Bible: most of Job, Lamentations, and, of course, the Psalms. But the Psalms are the only extended portion of the Bible which consists not only of poetry, but, quite explicitly, of song. 'O sing unto the Lord a new song [*shir hadash*]: Sing unto the Lord, all the earth./Sing unto the Lord, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day./Declare his glory among the heathen, his wonders among all the people' [96:1-3]. That is Psalm 96, and the whole collection ends with five poems which do not simply call out to the people to sing, but *become* that song, introduced by a word that means 'praise the Lord' but which is also onomatopoeic: *Halleluja*. And from the psalms themselves we learn that many musical instruments

were used to accompany at least some of them: harps, cymbals, trumpets, and a host that remain unidentified.

Scholars have of course for a long time been arguing about the precise *sitz im leben* of the Psalms, both the psalms as a whole and individual groups of them: were they pilgrim chants or sung by the temple choir? Was the bulk of them composed after the exile or before? And so on. Even if I was tempted to try to answer such questions, I would not have the tools. But I don't think it's important, in this case as in other parts of the Bible, to establish a precise *sitz im leben*. What is important, to my mind, is what it means that a great many if not all the Psalms seem to be sung, and sung communally - what it means to our *understanding* of them.

The early rabbis who commented on the Bible often saw patterns in it that eluded those intent solely on discovering how factually accurate the Bible was and how it came to be written. One thing the rabbis noted was that the Psalms have, since early times, been divided into five books, to mirror, they suggested, the five books of the Torah. And one reason why Psalm 1 heads the collection is perhaps that it includes, in its second verse, the word *torah*: 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, Nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful./But his delight is in the law [*torah*] of the Lord; and in his law [*torato*] doth he meditate day and night' [Ps.1:1-2]. The whole of this short Psalm, in fact, is, like Psalm 119, the longest in the Psalter, a meditation on the virtues of studying *torah*. As Nahum Sarna, in a splendid exposition of this Psalm, says: '[T]he study of the sacred and revered text itself constitutes a pious act, a profoundly religious experience, and is an important mode of worship' [*On the Book of Psalms*, p.29]. What Sarna shows, though, is that our modern conception of what 'studying a text' means falls far short of the rich experience early readers of the Bible would have taken from their encounter with it, and that this Psalm inducts us into that experience.

He begins with the first word, *ashrei*, which the AV renders as 'blessed' but which is usually translated as 'happy'. 'Although,' he says, 'the English translations imply a verbal sentence underlying the original Hebrew text, this opening phrase contains no verb at all. The Hebrew '*ashrei* is a noun in the construct state, that is, in the form it takes when joined to another noun on which it is dependent. Hence the phrase is really an exclamation meaning "O for the happiness of that person...!" It is the discriminating judgement of an observer who expresses wonderment and admiration over another's enviable state of being.' More than this, '*ashrei* is in the plural, the inflectional form denoting intensity. This "plural of intensity", as it is called, communicates energetic focusing upon the basic idea inherent in the Hebrew root. It is the highest form of happiness that the psalmist has mind' [pp.29-30]. And happiness, Sarna notes, is different from pleasure. Pleasure is 'an instinctive response to a particular stimulus that gratifies the senses; and it may be frivolous and illusory. By contrast, happiness is deep-rooted; it penetrates the very depths of one's being, and it is serious and enduring' [p.30].

It is because he takes delight in the *torah* of the Lord and studies it day and night, as opposed to the wicked, the sinners, the insolent, that a man is happy. But once again the English translation lets us down. The happy man is not 'studying' or 'meditating on' the first five books of Moses. For one thing, there is no mention of a 'book' of the Torah. Torah here means teaching, but 'the Lord's teaching' must define, as Sarna

says, 'a recognisable, established, and crystallised text that can be committed to memory and recited'. Secondly, we must rid ourselves of the notion that the activity mentioned is a purely inner one. '[T]he Hebrew verb, usually mistranslated "meditates",' Sarna points out, 'carries a decidedly oral nuance....The verbal form [of the root *h-g-h*] is used for the moaning of a dove, and the growl of a lion; it takes as its subject the mouth, the tongue, and the palate. The action of the verb obviously has an acoustical effect because the throat can be its instrument' [p.38].

So the happy man of our psalm is not engaged in meditation and contemplation, but in rote learning and verbal repetition, such as we find prevalent in many ancient traditions. Our own culture finds this hard to understand, because centuries of educational theory have persuaded us that rote learning is a bad thing, but that is our loss. This form of *torah* study was, as Sarna points out, seen as not only an act of piety but also as a fundamental mode of worship, both it and prayer being accorded in rabbinic literature the designation ' *avodah*, the standard term for the sacrificial system in the Temple in Jerusalem' [p.39].

We can now see why the Psalm goes on to say of this happy man: 'And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, That bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper' [Ps.1:3]. Reciting *torah* is an *activity* that *roots* him, gives him the strength to fulfil his potential, to grow into himself. By contrast the wicked 'are like the chaff which the wind driveth away' [v.4], taking their moment of pleasure but without roots and without water, and so incapable of real fulfilment.

Psalm 1, then, like Psalm 119, helps fill in the human consequences of 'walking in the way of the Lord'. It shows that this is not just a matter of being good, or of doing good, but of happiness and rootedness; and it also shows what happens to those who do not do so. Nevertheless, if what we treasure in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible is that they are never merely pious, that they see the complexity and confusion of human aims, desires and motives, we have to ask whether something of that can be found in the Psalms as well. Samuel Beckett, who was as rooted in scripture as any Hebrew writer, called his only radio play *All That Fall*. The reference is to Psalm 145:14: 'The Lord upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all those that be bowed down.' The reference is ironic; more than that, like so much of Beckett it is bitter, a bitter denunciation of a tradition that seemingly offers hope only to dash it, for the play concerns a boy who falls from a train and is killed. Do the Psalms, then, only consist of such pious injunctions as to study *torah* day and night, or of such uplifting but clearly false statements as that the Lord upholdeth all that fall, or do they, like the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, provide, if not an answer to Beckett's anguished cry, at least a response to it?

Let us return for a moment to the opening of Genesis. God speaks and an orderly world is created, a world in which each element respects its boundaries. But in the next two chapters we discover that language is a double-edged sword. First the serpent and then Adam and Eve use language to deceive, or to try to lessen their guilt. 'The woman... gave me..., and I did eat,' says Adam to God, trying to pass the buck. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' asks Cain of God in the next chapter. Language, it seems, is a slippery thing, which carries no guarantee within it of good usage. The establishment of the covenant at Sinai and the giving of laws to the Israelites provides

a blue-print for the good life, but it does not stop lying, hypocrisy and deceit, as the stories in Judges, Samuel and Kings abundantly demonstrate. The Psalms too recognise the prevalence of hypocrisy and duplicity in civic life: 'The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords' [Ps.55:21]. 'Hide me from the secret council of the wicked; from the insurrection of the workers of iniquity;/Who whet their tongue like a sword, and bend their bows to shoot their arrows, even bitter words:/That they may shoot in secret at the perfect; suddenly do they shoot at him, and fear not./They encourage themselves in an evil matter; They commune of laying snares privily; they say, Who shall see them' [Ps.64:2-5]. Are those the alternatives, then, to recite the Torah of the Lord all the days of our life, or to whet our tongue like a sword and aim our poisoned words at others?

The answer is no, there are innumerable ways in which we use speech, and in the Psalms we can see many of those in action. In the first place there is a high, an enormously high premium, put on the simple human ability to utter words. We can see this at work in Psalm 32: 'When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long./For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: My moisture is turned into the droughts of summer./I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will make confession my transgressions unto the Lord; and. thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin' [vv.3-5]. The speaker here, like David after his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, has tried to repress his guilt, but the more he does so the more it burdens him. At last he confesses to the Lord, and at once he is forgiven: 'Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the Lord, mercy shall compass him about' [v.10].

This is fairly straightforward, though we should note that there is a psychological as well as a moral dimension to this, as the Roman Church, with its institution of Confession, well understood. But the Psalms explore this aspect of speech, of what I would like to call utterance, at an even deeper level.

'The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into silence' [Ps.115:17]. On one level that is a truism: of course the dead do not praise the Lord - but what does it mean, 'neither any that go down into silence'? It could be a mere synonym for 'death', but Hebrew parallelism often works in more interesting ways, as Alter has shown, the second limb enriching and even questioning the first. The Psalmist is perhaps suggesting that silence, the inability or refusal to speak, is a kind of death, a psychological death. Such a psychological death is given many metaphors in the Psalms: silence, desert, being overwhelmed by the sea. 'O God, thou art my God; earnestly will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is' [Ps.63:1]. 'Thou holdest mine eyes waking,' says the speaker of Psalm 77, 'I am troubled and cannot speak' [v.4]. Most terrible of all perhaps is the devastatingly simple remark of the narrator of Psalm 88: 'I am shut up, and I cannot come forth' (*kalu velo ezeh*) [v.8]. The most interesting example from our point of view is the prayer or psalm in Jonah 2, which is close to Psalm 120: 'I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice./For thou hadst cast me into the depth, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about; all thy billows and thy waves passed over me.../The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds wrapped about my head./I went down to the bottoms of

the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever; yet hast thou brought my life from corruption, O Lord my God. When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord' [vv.2-7].

It is as if simply opening your mouth, giving utterance to your voice, releases something in you; as if finding words to express your total despair and the sense you feel of being shut up, unable to come forth, of having been rejected by the whole world, God included, makes the water return to the desert, makes life return to the one who was dead. The fact that the Psalm in Jonah is embedded in a narrative allows us to verify the truth of this, for no sooner has Jonah finished speaking than 'the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land' [v.10]. Of course it is important that Jonah and the 'I' of the other psalms on this topic cry out *to God*; but in a sense they only do so because God is the one who will always be prepared to listen. Simply giving voice, I would suggest, finding words for your anguish, is what in the first instance, makes it possible to overcome that anguish.

But if that is the first step, that which returns you to the world of men and so to yourself, it is important to note that there is often a last step. Psalm 32, with which I began this discussion of the importance of utterance, opened, as you will remember, with the remark that 'When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring [better: *groaning*] all the day long.' [Ps.32:3] But it closes like this: 'Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, ye righteous and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart' [v.11]. And it is with those words, rejoice, *simchu*, and shout for joy, *harninu*, that I want to end. They are words we find used abundantly throughout the Psalms, and they are linked to words for singing and dancing and making music. This cluster of words is what distinguishes the Psalms from all the other books in the Bible, and if we grasp their significance we have, I think, grasped *the* essential element of the Psalms.

As with the notion of utterance, of calling out to God in despair, there is both an obvious and a deeper significance to this cluster. The obvious significance is that if we recognise that God is the Creator of the world and the force that guided Israel in her long and tortuous history, then of course we can do no other than praise Him. The deeper significance can perhaps best be grasped by once again looking at Genesis 1, and then at a few other passages that reflect on that chapter.

The opening of the Hebrew Bible, as I said at the start, would have been a shock to someone used to the creation epics of other ancient near Eastern cultures. In sober rhythmic prose the creation of the world by the single God is described, a creation which consists of division and separation and of putting boundaries round things. But there are other places in the Bible where a rather different, more dynamic, more living view of the created universe is proposed. When, for example, at the end of Job, God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, he says:

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest?
or who hath stretched the line upon it?

Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or
who laid the corner stone thereof;

When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons

of God shouted for joy?

Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb? [Job 38:4-8].

There was nothing in Genesis 1 about the morning stars singing for joy or the sea attempting to break out of its confines. Umberto Cassuto has argued that this is because the writers of the Torah, the first five books, were extremely conscious of the need to distance themselves from the creation epics of the surrounding nations, and they made sure that not a whiff of independent life was given to the elements of God's creation. Be that as it may, the Bible often works like this, setting something down in one place and then qualifying or enriching it elsewhere, or even challenging it completely, as Job challenges Proverbs. I have suggested that in the Psalms of supplication we have evidence of anguished crying to the Lord which is rare in the other biblical books. But in the Psalms we also have, outside Job, the richest array of examples of a dynamic universe. 'The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork;/Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.' In this Psalm, 19, God has set a tent for the sun, 'Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race' [v.5]. In Psalm 66 we are told: 'All the earth shall worship thee, and shall sing unto thee; they shall sing to thy name' [v.4].

If the created universe is dynamic, this does not mean that it is chaotic. It is precisely because it is created by one God that it unites in celebrating Him. Even the roar of the sea is its own way of asserting its mighty power, vested in it by God, and therefore a testimony to God's own power, unimaginable to mortals like Job: 'Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein;/Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together Before the Lord; for he cometh to judge the earth' [98:7-9]. Psalm 114 is perhaps the finest example of this motif, combined here with the parallel motif of God not only as Lord of creation, but as Lord of history: 'When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language;/Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel His dominion./The sea saw it, and fled: the Jordan turned backward. The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs' [vv.1-4]. The sea fleeing is no doubt the Red Sea at the exodus, and the Jordan turning backward is the sign of the entry of the Israelites into the promised land. But the hills skipping like rams is purely gratuitous; like the mountains and the morning stars singing for joy, it is a sign of spontaneous joy.

But if the hills and the stars can break out into shouts of joy and song, into skipping and dancing, what of man? 'Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth,' says Psalm 98, 'make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise./Sing unto the Lord with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm./With trumpets and sound of comet make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King' [vv.4-6]. There is no divide between sea, mountains, and man. All must sing forth, and if the sea roars louder than men, men at least have timbrels and harps and cymbals and trumpets. And though of course such jubilation is good because it is a celebration of God's glory, it is also good *in itself*. The hills, like lambs, *need* to skip - it's in their legs, so to speak. And it's in the legs of men as well. Job is perhaps meant to be cowed by God's enumeration of His wonders, but the Psalms insist that man most fulfils himself when he moves beyond the sitting posture of study, beyond the careful use of language in its civic setting, to the expression of pure joy in the *ordered freedom* of song and dance:

Hallelujah.

Praise God in His sanctuary;
Praise Him in the firmament of His power.

Praise Him for His mighty acts;
Praise Him according to His abundant greatness.

Praise Him with the blast of the horn
Praise Him with the psaltery and harp.

Praise Him with the timbrel and dance;
Praise Him with stringed instruments and the pipe.

Praise Him with the loud-sounding cymbals;
Praise Him with the clanging cymbals.

Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord
Hallelujah.

Notes I have used the Authorised Version throughout. Its verse numberings often differ from those of the Hebrew Bible because the superscription of Psalms is not included. So those with the Hebrew text should simply add one - i.e. Psalm 4:1 in my text is 4:2 in the Hebrew (but 1:1 in my text is 1:1 in the Hebrew since Psalm 1 has no superscription).

I refer to the following books:

Robert Alter: *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, New York, 1981) *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Basic Books, New York, 1985)

Umberto Cassuto: *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, tr. Israel Abrahams, 2 vols. (The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1964)

Nahum Sarna: *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel* (Schocken Books, New York, 1993)

I have also benefited greatly from

J.P. Fokkelman: *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide* (John Knox Press, London, 2001)

Jonathan Magonet: *A Rabbi Reads the Psalms* (SCM Press, London, 1994)