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STATEMENT OF ASSURANCE IN PSALMS OF LAMENT.

J.G. McConville.

Psalms of Lament, while they have been described
in detail in a number of ways, are broadly speaking
those which express some agony of soul, whether of an
individual or on behalf of the community. but embody
within them either petition(such as the ubiquitous
"How long O Lord? Wilt thou forget me for ever?"
Ps.13:2 (1 EVV) or expressions of confidence in God
such as Ps.6:10f. (9f.); or indeed both. My concern
in this article is particularly with psalms which move
from distress to confidence, and indeed with the
transition itself. For here we have a problem of inter-
pretation: for what reason do such transitions occur?
Can we, indeed, know anything about the circumstances in
which they occur? Can we account for the fact that they
occur not just a few times. but frequently, and more or
less according to a pattern? In what follows I propose
to look critically at some suggested answers (one in
particular) and offer some reflections of my own.

Answers to the question thus posed fall broadly into
three categories, namely literary-critical answers.
psychological explanations and answers which postulate
the activity of a cultic functionary, usually thought of
as a prophet. who uttered oracles which altered the mood
of the worshippers. The last of these has certainly
been the most influential. and we begin with it.

The Cult-Functionary Explanation.

The names most frequently associated with the
theory of the cult-prophet are those of S. Mowinckel
and A.R. Johnson.[2] In their studies the role of the
prophet is much more extensive than the mere provision
of oracles at crucial moments in certain psalms. Rather,
they compose whole psalms. and indeed other compositions
not now contained in the psalter. e.g. Habakkuk 3. The
work of Mowinckel and Johnson constitutes a major
contribution to answering the complex question about the
relationship between psalmody and prophecy. That is a
debate which we cannot enter here in any comprehensive
way. It is important simply to notice that it forms the
background to our particular question. That is, when we
ask whether a transition from distress to confidence

within a given psalm may best be explained by appeal to
a cult-prophet we are engaging with a whole approach to
biblical psalmody and indeed to the prophetic literature
which looks for explanations of literary phenomena in
postulated cultic occasions.   The approach is far-reaching
and has affected Jeremiah and Isaiah 40-66 perhaps chiefly
among the prophetic books.[3] While our task is more limited
than to offer a challenge to that whole system of inter-
pretation, our point of concern is a not unimportant
aspect of it, for the system referred to requires for its
credibility such particular evidences as the prophetic
"oracle" in certain psalms is often held to be.

Let us now outline in more detail what the nature
of the proposal about prophetic oracles is. An example
is afforded by Ps.6. Vv.7f.(6f.) picture the psalmist
weary with his moaning, his eye "wasting away because of
grief". Then suddenly, vv.9-11(8-10):

> Depart from me all you workers of evil,
> for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.
> The Lord has heard my supplication:
> The Lord accepts my prayer. ·
> All my enemies shall be ashamed and sorely troubled;
> they shall turn back. and be put to shame in a moment.

If the change of mood which happens here has been produced
by the utterance of an oracle. it is clear that the oracle
has not actually been included in the psalm. It must be
regarded as falling between vv.8 and 9 (7 & 8). The
majority of psalms which exhibit a change of mood such
this one are similar in this respect, that an oracle is
assumed to have been uttered though not recorded. Propon-
ents of the cult-prophet theory can, however, point to
certain psalms which do contain words which may lend
substance to the theory. One such is Ps.12. This begins
(vv.2-5)(1-4) with a protest against the prevalence of
falsehood, drawing a cry for help from the psalmist. Then
in v.6(5) we find:

> "Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy
>   groan, I will now arise," says the Lord;
>   "I will place him in the safety for which he longs".

There follow statements of confidence in the Lord's
promises. Other more or less similar cases are Pss.
60:8-10(6-8) 85:9(8), 91:14-16.

It may seem, therefore, that we have two
different categories of psalm before us: one in which
the change of mood may be explained by an oracle,
plain for all to see, and one in which it cannot, or
not so readily at least. They should, however, all
be viewed together. This is first of all because the
theory in question has classically applied to both
categories. It is true that some interpreters have[4]
been less confident and applied it only selectively.
Where such selectivity occurs, however, it is not
necessarily along the line of separation between psalms
which contain oracles and those which do not. W.H.
Bellinger, in a recent work on psalmody and prophecy,
makes ad hoc decisions about the likelihood of spoken
oracles, finding for it, for example, in Ps.31, but
against it in Ps.57, where he thinks that the Psalmist's
new certainty could simply have arisen from his faith.[5]
Such choices only raise the suspicion of subjectivity.
In any case, we have already noticed that the oracle-
theory is only a part of a broader general approach to
the psalms, and the leading exponents of the theory have
not been interested in merely partial explanations.

Indeed, the need to discover concrete evidence
for the oracle-theory has been keenly felt by its
advocates (just as it has been called for by its critics).[6]
The most influential attempt to do so was that of J.
Begrich's "Das priesterliche Heilsorakel"[7]. It is worth
spending a moment on his thesis, because it continues to
be at the source of flirtation with the oracle-theory.
His specific contribution was to identify in Isaiah 40-55
examples of the "priestly oracle of salvation", i.e.
precisely the kind of oracle which is required to demon-
strate the theory in question for the psalms. To give one
example among many, Isa.49:7 is seen as a suitable response
to the appeal of the psalmist in Ps.31:16-19 (15-18).This
(or a similar statement) could, therefore, constitute the
oracle which is deemed to have fallen between vv.19(18)

and 20 (19), where, following the lament pattern,
statements of re-assurance begin.[8]

Begrich's thesis, therefore, is that oracles used
in the cult, though largely not preserved in the psalms,
have been taken up by the prophet in Isaiah 40-55 for
his purpose of announcing salvation to the Babylonian
exiles.

While Begrich's view has been much quoted and widely
influential,[9] it is open to criticism on a number of
counts. First, it may reasonably be objected that the
language shared by the lament psalms and Isaiah 40-55
is merely the common coin of religious affirmation, the
searching questions being one side of the coin and the
prophetic assurances the other. Secondly, there is a
serious question-mark beside Begrich's logic. As T.M.
Raitt puts it:

> First the evidence in Second Isaiah was used to
> solve a question in Psalms research. Then the same
> passages were taken as evidence of a cultic setting
> for the prophet's salvation-oracles. This is flagrant[10]
> example of a circular or self-validating argument.

The "evidence" for the priestly oracle in Isaiah is no
evidence at all, because there is nothing in Isaiah to
suggest the priestly origin of the statements cited. The
argument is really a double argument from silence: the
(almost complete) silence of the Psalms as to the oracle,
and the silence of Isaiah 40-55 as to its cultic setting.
A third objection (if more were needed) is that the
alleged match between the gap in the Psalms and the
affirmations in Isaiah 40-55 is not as satisfying as may
appear at first glance. One of the assurances in the
latter place has the plural address-form (e.g. 51:7-8),
though Begrich's thesis is entirely in terms of the
individual lament. More seriously, he has been"loosened
up" by the prophet for his own purposes, meaning that it
has in places expanded from an original one-liner into
a second line (as in 41:10).[11] This is simply to illustra
that what has been found in Isaiah 40-55 does not, in the

end, even correspond to what was originally sought.
The conclusion is inevitable that Begrich was dazzled
by a promising theory- even to the extent of arguing
that where one of Isaiah's "oracles" fails to find a
corresponding psalm, the omission from the psalter is
mere chance![12]

Begrich, then, has not found the independent
evidence which the oracle-theory requires. Is there
such evidence in any other quarter? It is sometimes
said that 2 Chr. 20:14-17 provides just such evidence
In this chapter King Jehoshaphat prays to God for
deliverance on the occasion of an attack on Judah by
an alliance of Moabites and Ammonites. His petition
(vv.6-12) resembles statements found in many lament-
psalms, emphasising the kingly power of God, his
promises to his people and even their own faithful
response, and appealing to God because of their
apparently imminent defeat. The context of the prayer
is a great assembly of the people of Judah. Such is,
almost by definition, a "cultic" assembly; particular
indications that this is so are the expression "seek
the Lord" (typical for worship in Chr.), the proclam-
ation of a fast (v.3), and the prayer itself. In the
midst of this expectant assembly, and in direct
response to Jehoshaphat's prayer, the Spirit of the
Lord comes upon a Levite, Jahaziel-ben-Zechariah(v.14),
who delivers a word from God, assuring the people of
victory and indeed instructing them to adopt a partic-
ular vantage-point from which to observe God's victory
(vv.15-17). Thanksgiving and praise are accordingly
offered by all the people (vv.18f).

Superficially, this event looks very like those
which Mowinckel, Johnson and others have sought as the
Sitz-im-Leben of lament psalms. A cultic functionary
gives a prophetic word of assurance following a lament-
petition, and the mood of the people changes from fear
to joy. However, there are two reasons why 2 Chr.20
does not provide the evidence needed to clinch the
cult-prophet theory. The first lies in the nature of
the occasion described in that place. Far from being
one of the regular cultic assemblies of Israel(as per

Exod.23:14-17), it is a special event born of the
impending crisis. Its particularity is reflected in
Jehoshaphat's prayer (with its reference to Moab and
Ammon, v.10) which thus distinguishes the prayer from
the more generalized petitions of the lament-psalms.
Neither the event itself nor the prayer offered, there-
fore, provides a real analogy with the situations ·
postulated by the theories of Mowinckel, Johnson and
others, which are precisely those of regular worship.
The second reason why 2 Chr.20 is unsuitable as evidence
for the Sitz-im-Leben of lament-Psalms is that Chronicles
has a particular interest in the role of prophets in[13]
general, and Levites (like Jahaziel) in particular.
The oracle here should be seen in the context of that
special interest. This is not to say that the event
described could not have happened, but the point illus-
trates again that, in seeking to solve a problem in
Psalms-interpretation by appeal to what happens in a
different kind of literature, one cannot ignore the
special characteristics of the latter.

   Before proceeding to other possible explanations
of the change of mood in lament-psalms, I want to make
just two more observations on the problems of the cultic-
functionary explanation. The first is that the Psalms
do not always follow the pattern which can make the
theory look plausible. Pss.42 and 60 illustrate the
point. Both these Psalms feature the phenomenon of the
change of mood. Neither, however, has a single, defin-
itive one. Ps.42 has a binary structure within which
the Psalmist twice moves through gloomy thoughts to
memories of God's goodness culminating in the refrain:

> Hope in God, for I shall again praise him,
> my help and my God, vv.6,12(5,11).

In Ps.60, likewise, the "oracle", vv.8-10(6-8), one of
those which has been allegedly preserved, does not
appear to have the desired effect, as the Psalmist's
mood of rejection, expressed initially in v.1, survives
it, v.12(10)! The renewed confidence comes only in
v.14 (12). These Psalms make it extremely difficult to
imagine what the event postulated by Mowinckel's theory

might actually have been like. Even in relation to
Psalms which seem to fit it better, the idea of a
cult - figure emerging, on cue, to say his lines
(for he would presumably have been called upon each
time the Psalm was used) strains credulity.[14] In
Pss.42 and 60 the imagination has either to admit
defeat or devise absurdities.

The second (closing) observation on the cult-
functionary theory is that it betrays little sensitiv-
ity to the literary poetic character of the Psalms,
which is certainly at least part of the answer to the
problem posed by the change of mood. The binary form
and double climax of Ps.42, already noticed, is a
function of literary artistry, not of any hypothetical
Sitz-im-Leben. To show this in detail would require
reference to a variety of Psalms. I shall confine
myself to one, namely Ps.12. This too has been mentioned
already, because it is one of those which possess a
word of God which has seemed to some to be one of the
elusive prophetic oracles required by Mowinckel's theory.
However, P.C. Craigie has called attention in a way of
understanding the words of God in terms of the meaning
of this particular Psalm. He rightly points out that
the Psalm is essentially about speech. Vv.2-5(1-4) are
about the lying, flattering speech of the wicked. V.6(5)
follows in stark and immediate contrasts, one of those
utterances of God which are further described, v.7(6),
as "pure". If the words of the wicked cannot be trusted,
those of the LORD most certainly can. As Craigie insists,
the oracle of God can be adequately explained in terms
of poetic device, and in general the literary quality
which is one of the Psalmists' concerns.[15]

Other Explanations.

The main contenders offered in the history of
scholarship as rivals to the cult-functionary theory
are the literary-critical and the psychological explan-
ations. The former need not delay us long. The juxta-
position of contradictory sentiments in the Psalms is
rarely explained these days in terms of the diverse
origins of the parts (as was done, for example, in the
ICC commentary in the early part of this century).[16]

Such an approach could not in any case cope with what
Mowinckel was at least trying to take seriously, namely
the regularity with which certain kinds of jarring jux-
taposition occur.

The psychological explanation is more interesting.
Its leading advocate, Friedrich Heiler, [17] believed that
the act of praying itself brought about the assurance.
As faith had led to prayer in the first instance so faith,
in the context of prayer, issued in peace of mind. It
hardly needs to be said that such experiences can and do
happen in the life of the believer. However, there is
an important difficulty here too if we attempt to explain
the phenomena we have observed in the Psalms in this way.
The difficulty is that it cannot explain the regular or
repeated use of any given Psalm. Granted that a Psalm
did originate in this way, it is already a "given", in
its entirety, for any subsequent user. The psychological
explanation would only be adequate if we could suppose
that each reader or user reproduced the emotional exper-
ience, indeed the sequence of emotional experiences, of
the author after him. Such is hardly true of the psychol-
ogy of worship. We do not in fact, as worshippers,
register the whole gamut of emotions from despair to joy
within the few minutes it takes to read a Psalm - or at
least we do not do so purely by virtue of reading it. To
this difficulty may be added the observation that the
psychological explanation may be felt not to handle
easily the more or less regular pattern of the lament-
Psalms. This, however, is a less important objection
than the former one, since poets can indeed express their
highly individual sentiments in regular or prescribed
forms. If we reject the psychological explanation,
however, we do so as an explanation of the lament-Psalms
as a vehicle of regular (and at least in the case of
community-laments, public) worship. This does not preclude
the possibility of the original inspiration of an
individual through a specific experience. It simply asks
how that inspiration relates to the kind of usage of the
Psalms which (presumably) has led to their collection
together in a book.

A Different Suggestion.

Hitherto I have assumed that the Psalms are
interesting not simply (indeed not even primarily)
as the deposit of various individuals' experiences,
but as the material used by people other than the
authors in their worship and spirituality. Thus far,
therefore, I have accepted the form-critical postulate
of Gunkel, which also underlay Mowinckel's work.
However, I do not wish, as they did, to locate the
great majority of the Psalms in the corporate worship
of the Jerusalem Temple. Some recent scholarship at
least is looking again at the possibility of a variety
of life-settings for the Psalms, including private
meditation, family worship and indeed the range of
situations thrown up by whatever kind of "pastoral"[18]
ministry may have been exercised·in ancient Israel.
This seems entirely healthy. I do not wish to claim
or exclude any particular settings for the Psalms;
many Psalms may have been usable in a variety of ways.
What does seem to be important is that Psalms were
brought to situations in order to assist worship.

Having said this I have already distanced myself
from the major proposed explanations outlined above.
In their different ways, both the psychological and the
cult-functionary explanations saw the Psalms as emerging
from worship; I wish to see them as being brought to it.
That is to say, I want to see the Psalms as having their
own coherence and completeness (which is denied by
Mowinckel's view), and as having potency apart from their
original and underlying inspiration (contra the psychol-
ogical view), which potency is the very reason for their
preservation.

How, then, are we to understand the jolting
phenomenon of the change of mood in the Psalms of lament.
The answer lies both in an observation drawn from biblical
theology and in one drawn from the psychology of religion
and spirituality. The theological category referred to is
that of memory. The biblical writers know well the
deficiencies of the worshipper's memory. The theme gains
its fullest expression in Deuteronomy, where the tendency

of those who are satiated to forget God their benefactor
is eloquently stated (Deut.8:11-20). The Psalmists
know this too. The author of Psalm 73 sees, as did
Deuteronomy, that memory has a moral dimension. Only
when he comes before God in worship does he shed his
misconceptions (vv.4-14) and see things once again as
they really are (v.17). Here is a theology for the
Psalms of lament. Their function is to draw the
worshipper back to those settled convictions which are
his, despite the challenges to them presented by circum-
stances and his own inconstancy. In giving expression
to his doubts, fears and protests, they meet him in his
disturbed state of mind and lead him through, or better
back, to faith, understanding and equilibrium.

Such a view corresponds exactly with what seems to
me to be actual experience or worship, again whether in
a formal setting or in private spirituality. In fact,
when we use Psalms, we do not switch on a range of
emotions as we read. The interaction between Psalm and
reader is not so mechanical. It cannot be uncommon to
come to a Psalm of joy while feeling deep sadness, or
indeed to a Psalmic expression of grief while elated.
The discrepancy between what is real and what is felt
can produce feelings of unreality and unease. Yet the
nature of the process between Psalm and reader is
genuine - if rightly understood. For there is indeed a
correspondence between the sentiments expressed in the
Psalm and the reader's experience. The sentiments are
all those which are familiar to him. If they are not all
his at the moment of reading, they are his in that they
characterize his experience at one time or another. The
Psalms gather up, perhaps in a stylized way, the whole
range of the believer's experience with God, and provide
a vehicle with which to express it. But they do more.
For they can actually "lead" the Psalm-user's mood. It
is in this sense that both the psychological and the
cult-functionary theories have missed something special
about the Psalms. They sought to explain the uncomfort-
ably abrupt change of mood in terms of some cause either
at the moment of composition or in the course of some
"original" and unrepeatable worship-event. In each case

an explanation was imported into the Psalm (a conjectured original experience, a cult-figure) which failed to reckon with how Psalms actually work repeatedly in routine worship. The real explanation of the change of mood is precisely its potency to effect a change of mood in the user. As he engages with the Psalmist's experience, so he identifies, first with the express- ions of fear, distrust etc., and then with the movement back to faith, as underlying convictions are reclaimed. It is clear that such an explanation is not incompatible with the belief that the Psalms were composed as the result of individuals' specific experiences. I have sought to show, however, that it is not enough to show how the Psalms originated, but also - and primarily - how they function in worship, since it was that function which led to their preservation, and which is of contin- ing interest to us today. The relation between the Psalmist's experience and the reader's is not automatic; the Psalm does not contain a blueprint. Nevertheless, those who gathered the Psalms together for the purpose of worship were well aware that the Psalms of lament, with their abrupt change of mood, required no other explanation or justification than their actual evocative power.

NOTES:

1.   See W.H. Bellinger, Psalmody and Prophecy, Sheffield, JSOT, 1984, pp.22-24, and p.98, n.1.

2.   S. Mowinckel, The Psalms in Israel's Worship, Oxford, Blackwell, 1962, vol.II, pp.58-75; A.R. Johnson, The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel, Cardiff, Univ. of Wales, 1944; and The Cultic Prophet and Israel's Psalmody, same publisher, 1979.

3.   On Jeremiah, H. Graf Reventlow, Liturgie und Prophetische Ich bei Jeremia, Gütersloh, Mohn, 1963, has expounded Jeremiah's so-called "Confessions" otherwise frequently seen as an outstanding example of personal devotion, as liturgical compositions. On the Book of Isaiah, cf. J.H. Eaton, Festal Drama in Deutero-Isaiah, London, SPCK, 1979.

4.   A. Weiser seems to distinguish between a larger
     number of Psalms for which an oracle has been
     claimed and a smaller number for which the theory
     may be presumed to have been "proved true"; The
     Psalms, London, SCM, 1962, p.79.

5.   Bellinger. op.cit. pp. 37,55.

6.   Bellinger cites G. Quell (ThLz 81, 1956, cols.
     401ff) and R. de Vaux (Ancient Israel, 1961, pp.
     384ff.) as sceptics. Quell in particular calls for
     a historical, rather than purely form-critical,
     argument; op.cit., p.16.

7.   ZAW 11 (1934), pp. 81-92.

8.   Begrich, p.84.

9.   See Bellinger, op.cit.,79-81, and his references
     there.

10. T.M. Raitt, A Theology of Exile, Philadelphia,
     Fortress, 1977, pp.154f.

11. Begrich, p.85.

12. Ibid. p.91.

13. Cf. H.G. M. Williamson, 1 and 2 Chronicles,London,
     Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1982, pp.30f.

14. Cf. M.D. Goulder's sceptical remarks, The Psalms
     of the Sons of Korah, Sheffield, JSOT, 1982, p.110.

15. P.C. Craigie, Psalms 1-50, Waco, Word Biblical
     Commentary, 1983, p.137.

16. C.A. and E.G. Briggs, A Critical and Exegetical
     Commentary on the Book of Psalms I and II, T & T
     Clark, Edinburgh, 1906, 1907.

17. F. Heiler, Prayer: a Study in the History and
     Psychology of Religion, ET London, OUP, 1932.

18. Cf. W. Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith
     A Suggested Typology of Function",JSOT 17(1980)pp.3-32.