

In most Hebrew texts Psalms 9 and 10 are treated as separate psalms. English Bibles in the Protestant tradition reflect this division. In the Greek and Latin versions of the Bible, Psalm 9 and 10 form a single literary unit. Psalm 9 ends unusually with a “selah” indicative of a pause or a stanza break. Psalm 10 is missing a title/superscription which is rare for psalms in Book I.

More significantly the two psalms share an alphabetical acrostic pattern. The first word of Psalm 9:1 begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the first word of 9:3 begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet and so on. Every other verse begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. However, the acrostic pattern is missing a few letters. Peter Craigie explains, “Psalm 9 covers the first eleven letters of the alphabet, of which only *daleth* is missing; there is some irregularity in the length of the units or ‘strophes,’ though the normal length is four lines (usually two verses).”<sup>1</sup> Psalm 10 follows the acrostic pattern maintaining the alphabetical sequence with several letters either missing or reversed.

Whether or not these apparent irregularities are by design or by default is hard to say. The poetic form serves the message, not the message the form. While David structures Psalms 9 and 10 as a literary unit “the form is incomplete and uneven” making it “hazardous to reckon that the alphabetical form must once have worked perfectly.” John Goldingay continues, “The incompleteness and unevenness, like the jerkiness of the psalm’s structure, correspond to the nature of the experience the psalm expresses and thus add to its effect. The psalm looks as if it is affirming that life has the order of the alphabet but also acknowledges that this is not always so.”<sup>2</sup>

Taken together Psalms 8, 9, and 10 do justice to the whole range of experience from the beauty of the cosmos to the depth of depravity. Theology and theodicy converge. In worship we feel the tension between the ordered universe and the chaos of evil. The person who is made a little lower than God and crowned with glory and honor *self-corrupts*. He turns against God and oppresses his fellow man. A fact that we cannot deny for “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

The grand plan of the universe appears vulnerable to practical atheists who prey on the weak and helpless. In their arrogance they crush the needy, revile the Lord, and trash creation. They operate their rigged system with the will to power and without moral restraint. In this sequence of psalms, David the king, acknowledges his inability to achieve the justice and righteousness that Yahweh’s creation deserves. In his helplessness he pleads, “Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God” (10:12). Out of a deep sense of his own human mortality, he prays that the wicked will come to terms with their mortality: “Strike them with terror, Lord; let the nations know they are only mortal” (9:20); “. . .so that mere earthly mortals will never strike terror” (10:18).

Whether Psalms 9 and 10 were originally one psalm or two, it is clear that they interface like a diptych, an altar-piece painting with two hinged panels that can close like a book. Psalm 9:1-12

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<sup>1</sup> Craigie, Psalms, 118.

<sup>2</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, vol 1:168.

answers Psalm 10:1-11 and the changed tone of 9:13-20 answers the changed tone of Psalm 10:12-18.<sup>3</sup> The sovereign rule of God over the nations is celebrated and praised in Psalm 9. Only a single verse hints at what is to come. David cries out, “Lord, see how my enemies persecute me! Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death. . .” (9:13). In Psalm 9 the focus is on God and the wicked are dismissed (9:1-12), but in Psalm 10 the focus is on the wicked and God is absent (10:1-11), until the finale when the rule and reign of God forms the climax (10:11-18).<sup>4</sup>

The order runs counter to our expectation. The answer, “The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment” (9:7), proceeds the question. “Why, Lord, do you stand off?” (10:1). David’s worship is an act of spiritual discipline. He begins with the truth before describing the problem. Theology sets the context for theodicy. The description of oppression – the focus on the wicked, is situated in a theology that has declared final judgment and ultimate victory against the impersonal collectives of unbelief and injustice – the nations. David knows that salvation belongs to the Lord. When he laments the free wielding power of the wicked he does not lose situational awareness. “The Lord is King for ever and ever; the nations will perish from the land” (10:16).

### *The Oppressor*

*Why, Lord, do you stand far off?  
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?  
In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak,  
who are caught in the schemes of his devious.  
He boasts about the cravings of his heart;  
he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord.  
In his pride the wicked man does not seek him;  
in all his thoughts there is no room for God.  
His ways are always prosperous;  
your laws are rejected by him;  
he sneers at all his enemies.  
He says to himself, “Nothing will ever shake me.”  
He swears, “No will ever do me harm.”  
His mouth is full of lies and threats;  
trouble and evil are under his tongue.  
He lies in wait near the villages;  
from ambush he murders the innocent.  
His eyes watch in secret for his victims;  
like a lion in cover he lies in wait.  
He lies in wait to catch the helpless;  
he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net.  
His victims are crushed, they collapse;  
they fall under his strength.  
He says to himself, “God will never notice;*

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<sup>3</sup> Wilcock, *The Message of the Psalms* 1-72, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Wilcock, *The Psalms*, 43.

*he covers his face and never sees.”*

Psalm 10:1-11

David’s case against the wicked is spurred on by the Lord’s failure to intervene. The psalmist is not naive about the psychology of evil, but he is perplexed by Yahweh’s hiddenness. He is like Job who cannot fathom God’s apparent distance and indifference to his unjust pain and suffering. His graphic description of evil is offered in a prayer. It is not meant for a human jury but for God. The psalmist confronts his frustration with the hiddenness of God *in worship*. The alternative to honest worship is to lash out in anger or turn inward in resentment. But real worship knows both the high praise of Psalm 8 and the deep pain of Psalm 10. Oppression is a complex evil bearing psychological, spiritual, economic, and political consequences and frequently renders the oppressed unaware of their true situation and vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> Worship is our defense against the numbing effects of moral pain and the danger of being co-opted by the oppressor.

David paints a picture of raw personal evil. He bores down into the meaning of the monolithic evil entities described in Psalm 9 – these impersonal collectives of unbelief and injustice known as “the nations” and “the world.” He moves beyond abstraction and portrays the personal tragedy of everyday evil. He offers an existential picture of the oppressor. Psalm 10 does not dwell on the plight of the oppressed (10:18). They are identified in various ways as the weak (10:2), the innocent (10:8), the helpless (10:9), the afflicted (10:14,17), the victim (10:10,14), and the fatherless (10:18). They are easy prey for an ingenious predator who “lies in wait to catch the helpless; he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net” (10:9).

The real story in this psalm is not the oppressed, but the oppressor. Like a prosecutor standing before a judge, the praying psalmist names the evils: exploitation, abuse, deception, murder, entrapment, and domination. He lays out the facts. He gets into the mind of the wicked. He exposes motives, explores strategies, and assesses damages. The wicked are “malicious, blasphemous, and ruthless.” They are “insolent and impious, practicing atheists.”<sup>6</sup>

Oppression typically arises from an elite who often have the power to subjugate others because of their wealth and privileged position. The psalmist portrays a proud, arrogant man who boasts about his cravings. He “blesses the greedy” (10:3) and struts around like a master of the universe. He is so full of himself he has no room for God! He is a big shot bully, a wheeler-dealer, who aspires for the corner office and the trophy wife. He has the power to cut jobs and raise profits with the stroke of a pen. He thinks nothing of driving people out of business or slandering a competitor. He is above the law (10:5) and shielded from accountability. He swears to himself, “Nothing will ever shake me. No one will ever do me harm” (10:6). He may be religious, but for all practical purposes he’s an atheist: “in all his thoughts he has no room for God” (10:4). He says to himself, “God will never notice” (10:11).

Christ’s followers are often naive about evil, but the Bible is not. In worship the psalmist profiles the predator. David leads us in prayer, reminding us that we are still up against the rage of Cain,

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<sup>5</sup> Webster, “Oppression,” EDT, 799.

<sup>6</sup> Ross, *The Psalms*, vol.1:322.

the pride of Pharaoh, the narcissism of Saul, the treachery of Absalom, and the greed of Ahab. Worship informs the soul to stay on guard against the wiles of the devil. We are challenged to pay attention to the deep roots of systemic evil that are perpetuated by the schemes and lies of the wicked. True spirituality raises our awareness of the roots of oppression in racial, sexual, political, and economic exploitation. We understand that dehumanization is a key concept in understanding the nature of oppression. Whatever prevents people from becoming more fully human contributes to oppression.<sup>7</sup>

The Psalms cause us to examine ourselves. We are part of systems (families, corporations, businesses, various groups and societies) that both help and hurt people. What is our role in bringing about social justice and righteousness? To what extent are we personally responsible for perpetuating discrimination and injustice? The Psalms remind us of how easy it is to fall into the hard-hearted mentality and selfish lifestyle of the oppressor. After highlighting the important themes of Psalms 9 and 10 – “the rule of God, the representative role of the king, the plea for help in time of trouble, the ways of the wicked and the righteous, and the justice of God on behalf of the weak and the poor,”<sup>8</sup> John Goldingay writes, “It speaks especially solemnly to powerful nations and especially encouragingly to weak ones. Most readers of this commentary therefore have to see themselves as the people who are being prayed against.”<sup>9</sup> Nigerian theologian Cyril Okorochoa writes:

“While it is easy for us to sit back with the psalmist and condemn such people, we also need to be aware that greed, pride and a desire for status can easily tempt us to commit similar sins. When we condemn others, we need to check that we are not doing the same things. We also need to check whether our security is rooted in God or in our own pride in our abilities.”<sup>10</sup>

Psalm 10 is also a sober warning against acquiring the mind set of the oppressor. It is easy for the oppressed, those who suffer the kind of everyday evil described in the psalm, to internalize the perspective of their exploiters. When we are surrounded by partners, associates, family members, classmates, and friends who boast about the cravings of their hearts and take pride in taking advantage of others we can easily fall into their mind set. When we have been exploited and treated unfairly, we can use the same strategies and schemes against others that were used to crush us. Instead of aspiring to be like the oppressor, we can struggle for righteousness.

There was a time when my friend Ray would say he was the mirrored image of the hapless man in Psalm 10. He spent twenty years listening to sermons and attending Sunday School classes before he began to take Jesus seriously. He admits that his Christianity had virtually no impact on his life and business career. He ran with the big boys and he could scheme and deceive like the best of them. For Ray the Bible was a book of idealistic platitudes and pious sayings, totally

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<sup>7</sup> Webster, “Oppression,” EDT, 800.

<sup>8</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, vol 1:184, quotes Patrick D. Millar, “The Ruler in Zion and the Hope of the Poor,” in David and Zion (J. J. M. Roberts Festschrift), ed. Bernard F. Batto and Kathryn L. Roberts (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 187-97, see 188-89.

<sup>9</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, vol 1:184.

<sup>10</sup> Okorochoa, “The Psalms,” Africa Bible Commentary. Editor, Tokunboh Adeyemo (Zondervan, MI: 2006), 619.

impractical in the workplace. But after a serious car accident in which he almost lost his life, he did some deep soul-searching. He woke up to the practical reality of what it means to follow Jesus.

Over time he began to pray – really pray for the first time in his life. He began to internalize the Word of God. This led him to change the way he did business. His priorities and values were transformed. His family became more important to him than his career. He altered his old habit of manipulating the truth to make himself and his department look better. For years he had sold customers more technology than they needed, thinking that if they were foolish enough to fall for his sales pitch, too bad for them. Now he could no longer do that. He found himself persuading customers to buy less rather than more, depending on their needs. The status symbols that had defined his self worth no longer mattered to him. Instead of disdain for those who were below him in the corporate pecking order, he began to befriend and value them. He sought to address the injustices that he had either ignored or condoned in the past. Of course, not everyone was impressed with Ray's transformation. Living for Christ instead of the corporation meant that Ray ran against the grain of the corporate culture. He was determined not to project a holier-than-thou attitude, nor did he want to be dismissed as a self-righteous gadfly. The mix of secular values and superficial piety that he had fostered for so many years were no longer possible. He deliberately became more Christ-like, and thus more humble, vulnerable, relational, loving and truthful. His days of practical atheism were over.

### *Praying for the Oppressed*

*Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God.  
Do not forget the helpless.  
Why does the wicked man revile God?  
Why does he say to himself,  
“He won't call me to account”?  
But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;  
you consider their grief and take it in hand.  
The victims commit themselves to you;  
you are the helper of the fatherless.  
Break the arm of the wicked man;  
call the evildoer to account for his wickedness  
that would not otherwise be found out.*

Psalm 10:12-15

Worship reminds us that the end of evil is beyond our power to achieve. We are moved to pray. If the king cries out in prayer because he is relatively helpless to help the helpless and because he cannot put an end to evil then the first priority of the faithful is to pray. We know that the end of evil will not come about through legal reform or advances in education. It will not be achieved by a thriving global economy or international efforts for world peace. Evil will only come to an end in God's final judgment. The will to power and the weapons of this world will not achieve the

end of evil.<sup>11</sup> Augustine saw in the psalmist's profile of the wicked man a picture of the Antichrist. He drew a direct parallel between the psalmist's profile and the apostle's description of the man of lawlessness: "He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (2 Thess 2:4).<sup>12</sup>

Augustine went even further and tied the psalmist's opening question, "Why, Lord, do you stand off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (10:1) to the hiddenness of the Lord's second advent. The final judgment and the end of evil remained hidden not only to King David but to the Son of David, the ultimate Judge. Augustine gave to Psalm 10 a decidedly eschatological perspective. "Indeed, the very day of the Lord's advent may be rightly numbered among the hidden things of the Son, although the very presence of the Lord itself will be manifest. For of that day it is said, that no man knows it, neither angels, nor powers, nor the Son of Man (Mk 13:32)."<sup>13</sup> Jesus will continue to stand with us in solidarity as we await his second coming, when the Lord's hiddenness will be removed and the end of evil will be final.

Meanwhile, David is confident that God, "the helper of the fatherless" (10:14), sees all the trouble and grief of the afflicted (10:14) and is ready to act. "Break the arm of the wicked man," is a bold plea to stop evil in its tracks. "This may not seem like an appropriate prayer for New Testament believers; nevertheless, if believers pray for the Lord to come quickly, they are calling for him to come and judge the world and remove wickedness entirely."<sup>14</sup>

### *Benediction*

*The Lord is King forever and ever;  
the nations will perish from his land.  
You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted;  
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,  
defending the fatherless and the oppressed,  
so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror.*

Psalm 10:16-18

The psalmist ends on a hymnic note of absolute confidence in the sovereignty of the Lord who is the everlasting King. These last few verses form a fitting climax to both Psalm 9 and 10. Once again the psalmist underscores the short-lived mortality of the nations. The impersonal collectives of unbelief and injustice which are antithetical to the ways of the Lord "will perish from his land." But the Lord has already heard the desire of the afflicted and the Lord has already encouraged and strengthened the heart of the helpless. Yahweh will defend and vindicate the God-dependent fatherless and oppressed.

Psalm 10 recalls Jesus' parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus tackles the intractable geopolitical problem of oppression and the enduring eschatological

<sup>11</sup> Webster, Follow the Lamb, 224.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, On the Psalms, vol. 8: 38.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, Psalm X, vol.8: 40.

<sup>14</sup> Ross, The Psalms, vol 1:330.

dilemma of delay by telling a story of a helpless widow seeking justice and a unjust, selfish judge who looks out for himself. The judge neither feared God nor cared what people thought. He refused her repeated pleas for justice, but she persisted, saying, “Grant me justice against my adversary.” Eventually, the widow wore the unjust judge down and even though he did not fear God nor care about justice he relented and reluctantly gave in to her plea for justice. Jesus’ point is direct. If an unjust judge can be brow beaten into doing the right thing, will not the holy and just God who hears the cry of his chosen ones day and night bring about justice and vindicate the righteous? The answer is an emphatic “Yes!” Jesus says, “I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.” “Yes, God answers. His delays are not denials.”<sup>15</sup> But then Jesus closes the parable with a question that stops us in our tracks, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Lk 18:8). The question throws us back into the struggle of the psalmist. Can we trust in the Lord’s justice, that in due time he will vindicate those who belong to him in Christ?

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<sup>15</sup> Okorochoa, Africa Bible Commentary, 619.