

SUPPLICATION IN THE PSALMS

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FAR the largest category in the psalter are the 'Individual Laments', the psalms in which an individual Israelite—as opposed to the whole community—complains to Yahweh of some distress, and pleads to be rescued from it. In the very nature of the case the attitude here must be more self-conscious than in the hymns of praise.¹ He who praises strives to lose himself in his awareness of Yahweh; he who supplicates strives to find himself in Yahweh's awareness of him. Before it was a question of man reaching up to Yahweh; now it is a question of Yahweh bending down to man. Yet still the focus of attention is fundamentally the same. Still Yahweh is there among his people, united to each single member by the covenant-bond. Still the soul of the suppliant Israelite is dominated by the overwhelming consciousness of Yahweh listening, and Yahweh *there*.

What is in the mind of that suppliant, standing in the presence of his God, praying not quietly in his heart but at the top of his voice, with every resource of human eloquence, with wild gestures and with tears?

'Lord, I have cried out to you; please hasten to me! Listen to my voice as I cry to you!' (Ps. 141, 1).

It is an elemental cry for help from one covenant-partner to another. The fact that the partner invoked happens to be Yahweh himself only makes the appeal more irresistible, more certain of response. This certainty of response is a recognized factor in the formal structure of the Individual Lament. Scholars have noticed that at a certain point in this type of psalm the tone changes suddenly and completely. One minute the psalmist is expatiating on his miseries in a mood of the most intense grief; the next he is rejoicing and praising Yahweh in the absolute conviction that his prayer has already been heard, his need answered, his difficulties resolved. To this characteristic feature the name 'Certainty of a Hearing' has been given. Here then is another case of formal structure in the psalms being conditioned by the basic attitude of mind which inspired them.

A further point, perhaps even more significant, has been

1 See the author's article, 'The Response to Holiness' in *BLACKFRIARS* for October 1957.

noticed. In this type of psalm far more frequently than in any other the psalmist addresses Yahweh by his sacred name and in the imperative.

'Yahweh, do not punish me in your anger!' (Ps. 6, 1.)

The extreme boldness of this approach seems in many cases subsequently to have been tempered by substituting 'Elohim', 'God', for the proper name 'Yahweh'. However, the fact remains that this imperative appeal to Yahweh by his covenant-name is especially characteristic of the Individual Laments. Why is this? To a Semitic mind the name is a sort of sacrament of the personality for which it stands. This is as true of Yahweh's name as of any other. When he chose Israel as his covenant-partner and gave her his name to invoke him by, he was in effect giving her a certain right to himself, to his omnipotence. The strength and wisdom which created the world was, so to say, enshrined in the four sacred letters of the name YHWH. Henceforward Israel was to turn to Yahweh and invoke him by name as the source of her life and light.

'They in chariots, they in horses, but we in the Name of Yahweh our God' . . . (Ps. 20, 8.)

Above all she was to turn to him as her covenant-partner, pledged, provided she was faithful to her side of the covenant, to respond to her appeal for help.

'If you hearken in earnest to his (my angel's) voice, and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies, an adversary to your adversaries.' (Exod. 23, 22.)

For Yahweh not to respond to the faithful Israelite's call for help would be utterly unthinkable. It would imply that he could be unfaithful to his own covenant—a blasphemous suggestion! Thus the Israelite's 'Certainty of a Hearing' is based on his absolute conviction of Yahweh's fidelity to the covenant. To invoke Yahweh's name does not, as some have suggested, automatically release cosmic forces into the world for blessing or cursing. We are dealing here not with a magical formula, but with something no less irresistible in its effects, the unbreakable personal bond between Yahweh and Israel. The elemental forces of creation are placed at the faithful Israelite's service. Yahweh would turn the whole world upside down if necessary to help his covenant-partner. Immediately, irresistibly, when appealed to by name, he will respond.

If there is any question of infidelity it is on Israel's side. This alone could cause Yahweh even temporarily to withhold succour from her. And so in these psalms we find the Israelite examining his conscience, probing his own soul to find out why Yahweh has delayed in coming to his help, going through a sort of 'Negative Confession' in order to protest his innocence.

'Yahweh, my God, if I have done this: if I have ill-gotten goods
in my hands

If I have given back evil for friendship, if I have robbed my
enemies without cause,

May the enemy pursue me and overtake me,

Trample my life to the earth,

Throw down my honour in the dust . . .'. (Ps. 7, 4-6.)

Even when he is conscious of having sinned he still remembers that Yahweh is a God not only of fidelity, but of merciful forgiveness and compassion too. Again and again in these psalms we find the suppliant turning back to that revelation of Yahweh as *personal* which was given when the covenant was inaugurated.

'Yahweh, Yahweh, God of compassion and graciousness,

Slow to anger, full of merciful love and fidelity,

Remaining merciful and loving to thousands

Removing faults, transgressions and sins . . .'. (Exod., 34, 6-7.)

For the gentiles God is the ruler of the world, terrible but still happily remote. For the Israelite he is Yahweh of the covenant, a God who will listen patiently and respond to his personal needs and distresses with the same elemental power and wisdom which fashioned heaven and earth. In the hymns he praised that power. Here in the supplications he summons it to his aid. The hymn is humanity's response to Holiness; the supplication visualizes the response of Holiness to humanity's small private miseries.

This then is how the suppliant in the Individual Laments thinks of the God to whom he opens his heart. But how does he want that God to think of him? What account does he give of himself to Yahweh? Above all he wants to be thought of as a covenant-partner, one in whose life and fortunes the 'honour' of Yahweh is inextricably involved.

'Help us, God of our salvation for the glory of your name!
(Ps. 79, 9.)

'For your name's sake, Yahweh, bring me back to life!

In your justice rescue my soul from distress!

In your gracious love blot out my enemies! Annihilate all those that are cruel to me!' (Ps. 143, 11-12.)

To the Semitic mind 'honour' is always a major consideration, and the underlying thought here is that Yahweh's honour is at stake. If he fails to rescue his covenant-partner, his name (and therefore he himself) will be brought into derision. His enemies (who are also the psalmist's) will say either that it is because he is too weak, or (such is the unspoken implication) that he is not prepared to honour his covenant pledge. On the other hand if he does intervene the very hopelessness, humanly speaking, of the Israelite's position will serve to bring him great honour. His justice, fidelity, mercy and power will be made manifest in a miraculous victory and rescue at the very moment when all seemed lost. Thus the 'Appeal to Yahweh's Honour' is another recognized characteristic of these psalms.

It will be apparent from what has been said why the Israelite tries deliberately to represent his case in the most hopeless possible light. This attitude of mind presupposes a conception of Yahweh as the God of the weak, the humble, and the afflicted, which is really very old. In later times it was developed and formalized until it involved the further idea of a continual state of opposition within Israel between the *anawim*, the poor clients of Yahweh, and the 'workers of iniquity', the representatives of worldly power and wealth. But even in the history of the patriarchs Yahweh is already the exalter of the weak and poor, and the rebuker of the powerful and proud, as in the story of Abraham, for example, or of Jacob and Laban, or of Joseph. The parable with which Nathan rebuked David epitomizes the Israelite mentality on this point, and the supreme example is of course the miraculous deliverance of Israel from Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea.

Yahweh therefore was known to be the God of the afflicted but righteous who had no earthly resource on which to rely. The Israelite was never so likely to obtain his favour as when he could appear before him in this state. Hence the suppliant in these Individual Laments strives with all his power to induce Yahweh to regard him as one of the *anawim*.

It is a striking characteristic of these psalms that the psalmist loves to describe himself as on the verge of death and the grave. He is at his very last gasp, using up the last breath of his life in a

final cry to Yahweh for rescue before death swallows him up for ever. There is a significant reason for this.

The Hebrew mind conceived of life as something dynamic and intense, like a flexed muscle.² Life and death were not sharply differentiated spheres. Abundance of life included happiness of mind, prosperity, fertility. Conversely death was the slackening of the muscle. Misery, barrenness, material misfortunes and sickness were already degrees of death. To pass out of the land of the living into Sheol was merely to pass on to the final point in a process which had already begun long before.

Thus whatever the particular misery is from which the Israelite is suffering, his appeal is usually couched in terms of a desperate cry for help from one in mortal danger.

'Save me, God, for the waters have come up to my throat.'
(Ps. 69, 1.)

But what are these miseries? Far the most frequent descriptions are of sickness and disease. These however are hardly ever really specific and were probably composed, rather like the Church's official prayers for the sick, to fit any variety or degree of infirmity. Again, the psalmist sometimes seems to be complaining of an unjust decision in the law-courts. Sometimes even, it is simply a question of psychological suffering, fear, anxiety or depression of spirit, especially when this is due to enforced absence from Sion.

However, his chief preoccupation is with the person causing the misfortune. To the Hebrew life and fortune are entirely dependent on personal relationships. The world is made up of friends and enemies. Misfortune is never impersonal; it is always due to some person, known or unknown, human or supra-human, who is actively afflicting him.

Very often the afflicter is Yahweh himself. In that case the suppliant may alternatively protest his innocence or, having acknowledged his guilt, point out how terribly he has been punished and how merciful Yahweh is, and so plead for relief.

But no less frequently he attributes his unhappy state to malignant enemies plotting against him, working for his destruction, hunting him like a wounded animal, or even openly deriding

² This is more than mere simile. According to many authorities the semitic root for the verb 'to live' contained originally this idea of muscular contraction, while conversely the root word for 'to die' meant literally 'to expand', 'to relax'.

him and depriving him of his elemental human dignity, his 'honour'.

'Evilly say my enemies against me: How long till he die, and his name be blotted out:

'All those that hate me are whispering together against me, plotting ruin for me'. (Ps. 41, 6, 8.)

In many cases these enemies would be his fellow-men, sometimes, indeed, his former friends, but not always, and not necessarily. Active malignant spirits may have been invoked against him, and his only safety is to flee to Yahweh his God. Curse must be met with counter-curse, and hatred with counter-hatred, not only his, but Yahweh's also. For his enemies must be Yahweh's enemies too. That is what it means to be in covenant with him.

It would be dishonest to attempt to mitigate the intensity of hatred evinced in these psalms. Positive hatred of evil is still a necessary corollary of Christian love, and in the imperfect religion of the Old Testament Hebrew man could not distinguish between evil and the evil-doer. He could only see that the 'enemies' belonged to the sphere of evil, and hate them accordingly under that aspect. The Christian distinction between sin and the sinner was still far distant.

Finally, what sort of help does the suppliant in these psalms visualize? Let us return for a moment to the fundamental Hebrew concept of Yahweh as the creator of the world, the people, and the individual. When the God of the Hebrews made the world he blessed it with the elemental blessings of life and light. At the exodus he 'created' Israel anew with these same blessings, projected now from the cosmic on to the national plane. Life now becomes fertility, prosperity, strength in war, the elemental life-force of the covenant blessing. Light becomes the Law itself, the 'words of life' which are to guide Israel's steps, separating her from the sphere of darkness, evil, and death, and keeping her united to Yahweh her creator. Finally, here in the Individual Laments we see the individual Israelite drawing down these elemental forces of creation into his own small private circumstances. Alone and drowning in a dark tumult of hostile forces, what he cries out for in his moment of terror is more light and more life.

'Lead me, Yahweh, in your justice because of my enemies!

Make your way plain before my face!' (Ps. 5, 9.)

'Send out your Light and your Truth, let them guide me!
Let them bring me to your holy mountain, to your home!'
(Ps. 43, 3.)

'Make me live, Yahweh, for the sake of your Name!' (Ps. 143,
11.)

With the voice that thundered order into the cosmos, with the breath that blew it into glowing life, Yahweh of the Covenant answers because one small Israelite down there in the darkness is, for one instant in the world's history, frightened, and in pain.

THE TRADE UNIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD

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DURING recent decades the power and prestige of the trade union movement have been greatly increased. In the years between the two wars, the trade unions enjoyed full legal recognition, and even a privileged position at law. (They could induce workmen to break their contracts of employment, for example, without being liable to be sued for damages by the employers, and this meant that in no circumstances could the union be prevented from striking, however unreasonably, by any threat to its funds.) The achievement of full employment during and since the war has naturally increased their bargaining power. Many employers now welcome the co-operation of an organized body representing their workmen where previously they had only grudgingly accepted the existence of the trade unions. The consultations between the Government and trade unions on certain matters of economic policy have continued in the post-war period, though it would not be true to say that there has always been real co-operation.

In the situation now facing the unions, there are different objectives that the unions should be pursuing, or different means of pursuing certain ends that remain unchanged. Yet in many ways it seems that the unions have failed to adapt themselves to the changed conditions. It would be impossible in the space of a short article to consider all of the problems involved in this