



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“I can understand the necessity for historical and prophetic Books in the Old Testament but of what value are the Books of Poetry?”

The questioner highlights a basic deficiency in our approach to the Word of God, namely, that unless the text of Scripture indicates something which is either theological or doctrinal then it is comparatively valueless to us. Many of the problems which debaters – we might even say combatants – have agonised over have been concerned with the literal text; needless to say, the results have been at best counter-productive and at the worst downright divisive. Literalism has reigned supreme; our understanding of our true Christian heritage has been downgraded. The comparative insignificance of our numerical strength reflects the intensity of our internecine struggles. It may be interestingly nostalgic to dwell on events and personalities of the past, but our immediate concern should be with the potential for the future. It is my firm belief that an understanding of the poetic works in Scripture will assist us greatly.

What is Poetry?

Poetry is an art form. The real worth of the poet is his ability to express the beautiful and elevated thoughts which come into his mind. He must do it in such a way that he evokes responses in those of us who have not the imagination to conceive the thoughts, and have not the words to express them even if we did; as Emerson says, “He (the poet) unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene”.

So it is with music also. Who can fail to be moved by the uplifting melody of the orchestral intermezzo “Judex” from Gounod’s church cantata “Mors et Vita”; by the thundering reverberations of the wave simulations in Mendelssohn’s “Hebrides Overture”; or by the expansive grandeur of the ‘heroic’ Third Symphony, the ‘Eroica’, by Beethoven. These, and many others, are expressions of imaginative thought interpreted for us by the composers through the medium of music. They excite and they thrill; they transport us from the mundane to unimagined soul-satisfying heights. They express that which in normal circumstances would be inexpressible by us. I use these examples to indicate to us that joy and ecstasy have to be sought through the relevant expressive mediums; the notes of a symphony on paper would be bleak and unmotivating to us, but when fully orchestrated and harmonised they become thrillingly real. So it is with our responses to God. We sing the hymn ‘Break thou the bread of life’, some lines of which say,

“Beyond the sacred page, I seek thee Lord;
My spirit pants for Thee, Thou living Word.”

If we would know **about** God we look to the literal text. If we would **know** God, we look **beyond** the text. For that, we need the poets.

The Hebrew Heritage

Many of us would view the slaughter and sacrifice of animals with some distaste; we perhaps fail to appreciate why God countenanced this. It is true to say, I believe, that the most significant act of worship in early days was sacrifice, and it would be equally true to say that during this worship the feelings of the worshippers would be stirred to such a degree that they would make expressions of praise to the One to whom they were offering the sacrifice. **Words** of praise would be a natural way of expressing an exquisite feeling; and so was born the poetry of the time.

The Books of Poetry in the Bible are, as we perhaps know, the Psalms, Job, Lamentations, the Songs, and Proverbs. These Books are perhaps not identifiable as poetry in the sense in which we understand poetry today. Poetic Form and Metre were only in the formative stages in early Hebrew history; to the Hebrew poet, the thought expressed in words was more important than the form in which those words were written, so if we are looking for something like Cowper's,

"There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains",

we shall not find it, but we **shall** find a concept of Deity which is so dramatic and awe-inspiring that we shall be arrested by the majesty and scope of the thoughts behind the words. It is the sort of intimacy with Deity that our Father wants to foster in us; Jesus put it this way when He prayed to His Father, "I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be made perfect in one" (John 17:23). If in such a relationship we do not find the soul-energising satisfaction that we ought to, then we are indeed appreciating nothing more than a textual form of words.

Some Examples

The greatest of the Books of Poetry is, of course, the Book of Psalms. Here we can find some of the greatest poetical works of the Bible.

First of all let us examine the unity of verses which are tied together, so to speak, with a 'refrain'; we find a good example of this in Psalm 136, where the 'refrain', "for his mercy endureth for ever", continues all the way through the Psalm. When we read this portion of Scripture we are arrested with the thought that God is Good, and it is to Him that we should constantly give thanks. The Psalmist then goes on to show how this Good God watched over the welfare of the Israelite nation throughout its history. In singing the praises of this great God the Psalmist hammers out the recurring refrain, "for his mercy endureth for ever".

Now just think what this would mean to the devout Jew. This great, good God, the God of gods, who had created the very earth on which they lived, who had spread out the heavens above them, who had delivered them from bondage, who had parted the Red sea, this mighty God was **their** God; He was **their** Father; and more than that, His mercy would never end. How the heart would thrill to this sublime thought. How the soul would leap as it were with joy. How they would shout out to each other, "His mercy endureth for ever".

But wait! Isn't He the God and Father of Christians today?: Of course He is. And cannot we in our weaknesses, depressions, griefs, and trials, sing out this glad refrain, "His mercy endureth for ever"? Yes, indeed we can and should. And, oh, do we not see that when He sacrificed His only Son to remove the guilt of **our** sin that He did a mightier work than parting the Red sea, when He brought **us** out of the bondage of sin? Yes, I will **sing** of **my** Redeemer, "for his mercy endureth for ever". What a refrain!

We can see further examples of 'refrain' if we look at Psalm 42 vv 5, 11, and Psalm 43 v 5, when self-examination poses the question, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul"? and the answer is given, "Hope in God".

Another intense, emotional experience is the desire for someone or something not now available to us. This can give rise to a heart-rending song of despair; ask anyone who has lost a much-loved wife, husband, or child. Psalm 137 is a good example of this type of despairing lament.

You can picture the scene. The Children of Israel in captivity in Babylon. There they are weeping, desolate, sitting by the rivers and being taunted by their captors. "Sing us one of the songs of Zion". How they must have regretted their off-handed

treatment of God when they had spurned His love. Oh, what despair to be in bondage to a people who worshipped alien gods.

But don't you see what that song of despair is all about, dear brother, sister. The harps, the strings of which had vibrated under the impulsive urge of praise to God, now hung listlessly on the willows. The melody, which had once accompanied the praise to God, was now silent in a hostile environment; they were in a far country, not now under the benign rule of God. but subject to the malicious taunts of their captors. They were intensely sad. The message to us is loud and clear; why should we want to leave the green pastures that God leads us into, for the arid wastes of the 'far country'? Let us resolve to so worship and praise God that **our** hearts will always sing the melody of love, and our lips will continually praise His name.

You see, dear questioner, we have only explored a small portion of the greatest Book of Poetry in the Bible. What treasures it will yield to us if we continue. What new horizons to look to. The poetic Books of the Bible are of immense value to us, and it is only when we have unlocked the treasure of the poets that we shall truly become the willing and obedient servants that God wants us to be. If we look upon Christianity as a chore, perhaps the poet can transform it to us into a symphony of praise and love. Perhaps someone better qualified than I can unlock further treasures for us.

(All questions, please, to
Alf Marsden, 20 Costessy Way, Winstanley, Wigan, Lancs. WN3 6ES)