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rehabilitation into Christian preaching. At the same time, the theological agenda on sexuality is increasingly dominated by non-biblical ideology. On the one hand the traditional limitations on sexual expression are attacked and dismantled; on the other hand we are told that God is 'beyond gender' and that sexuality is merely a matter of biology or convention. The *Song of Songs*, rightly interpreted, could provide an essential corrective, but it may require a revolution in our own thinking before we are able to preach what it teaches.

Dr. John P. Richardson is Chaplain of the University of East London. p. 258

Preaching on the Psalms

W. H. Velema

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INTRODUCTION BY ALLAN M. HARMAN

The interconnection between faith and experience continues to be a challenge to Christians today, just as it has in the past. The cognitive aspects of the Christian faith cannot be isolated from the experiential elements. There has to be a balance maintained between the intellectual assent to the gospel and the practical outworking of its truths in individual and communal Christian living. The vitality of the Reformed faith now and in the future depends upon adherence to biblical patterns of faith and experience.

The term 'spirituality' is of modern usage in Protestantism, though it is a term which is well-known from Catholicism.¹ Its origin goes back at least to North Africa, where the church fathers used the Latin word *spiritualitas* to describe all of a Christian's life originating from the work of the Holy Spirit. The Reformers used the expression 'piety' (*pietas*) more commonly,² though this expression (at least in English) has now been debased and taken on a pejorative meaning. The Puritans used the term 'godliness' as a comprehensive description of piety, while the Methodists spoke of 'holiness'. Probably the most common descriptive term used in Reformed circles in the past has been 'sanctification'. I find no difficulty, however, in using the term 'spirituality', as long as it is clearly defined. I am using it in the sense that it is God's revelation, believed and acted upon. p. 259

When we turn to the Psalms we see frequent expressions of trust in the Lord. Those whose trust is in him display an entire self-commitment to him, along with obedience to

¹ For some comment on the use of the term, see Owen Chadwick, in *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Gordon Rupp*, edited by Peter Brooks (SCM Press, 1975), pp. 205–206.

² For Calvin's use of the term, see H. W. Simpson, '*Pietas*' in the '*Institutes of Calvin*', *Reformational Tradition: A Rich Heritage and Lasting Vocation* (Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1984), p. 179–191.

his word and commands. A wide variety of language is used to describe this relationship. The people of God are said to act in certain ways including 'believe', 'trust', 'take refuge in', 'rely upon', 'wait for', and 'wait patiently for'. Some of these expressions are used in contrast to putting trust in substitutes like military weapons, princes, idols or even man himself ([Ps. 44:6](#); [135:15-18](#); [52:7](#)).

In all their experiences the psalmists were relying on the character of God as he had made it known. There was no special word of revelation to help them in their time of need. Because there was no personal message they had to rely simply on God's love and mercy revealed previously. In times of great perplexity it was knowledge of God's revelation which broke through and brought light into a dark situation. Thus in [Psalm 73](#) the psalmist was in turmoil about the prosperity of the wicked until he came into God's house and then he understood the end of the wicked ([Ps. 73:16-17](#)). Faith in the book of Psalms is like faith elsewhere in the Bible; it is reliance on God and his character as he has revealed it.

CONCLUSION

At its strongest periods the Reformed faith has kept a balance between adherence to biblical doctrine and the experiential appropriation of that doctrine in the lives of individuals. In a period of church history which has seen such rapid changes in belief and practices, we need to maintain a commitment to that balance. Maintaining apostolic doctrine and apostolic experience go hand in hand. Reformed spirituality must be nourished, for it is vital for our witness to the world concerning the gospel. As part of that nourishment the continued use of the psalter has an important role to play.

PREACHING ON THE PSALMS¹

PURPOSE

It is our intention to consider to what extent the religious experience of the psalmist can or should become the religious experience of the congregation. Can we draw a straight line from the experience of the past to that of the present? Is it permissible to equate the psalmist with those who now listen to the sermon? We are concerned here with the religious experience in the preaching of the psalms. Yet, before we enter into that subject, we would first like to say something about the [P.260](#) Psalms as a specific sort of preaching material.²

The Bible contains various forms of style. The Holy Spirit also equipped poets to understand the true character of the psalms. We should not analyse the phenomenon of poetry first in order to offer a homiletic view on biblical poetry afterwards. In that case homiletics is filtered through analyzing the phenomenon of lyric poetry. On the contrary

¹ This article is an abridged version of the original Dutch article: W. H. Velema, 'Preken over Psalmen', in *Theologia Reformata* 30 (1987), pp. 217-230. Translated by Drs. Susan van der Ree.

² Of the Dutch literature on the different types of preaching, we would like to mention: T. Hoekstra, *Gereformeerd Homiletiek* (Amsterdam, 1973), 2nd ed., pp. 316-352, with special reference to pp. 352-377: The particular form of preaching material; S. F. H. J. Berkelbach van der Sprenkel, P. J. Roscam Abbing (ed.), *Handboek voor de prediking* (Amsterdam, 1948), K. Dijk, *Dienst der prediking* (Kampen, 1955) discusses a classification of the different 'materials' of the Old Testament on pp. 194-252, and the different 'materials' of the New Testament on pp. 253-308. C. W. Mönnich, F. J. Pop (ed.), *Wegen der prediking* (Amsterdam, 1959) makes a subdivision according to themes of the different chapters.

the poetic form is subservient to that which the Holy Spirit reveals in that specific psalm. The subordinate character of poetry should appear to full advantage in the homiletic discussion of it.

THE EXPOSITIONS OF SOME OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARS

We recall Von Rad's exposition. He wrote about Israel's answer to Yahweh, which is given in praise.³ He relates that Israel has met the reality of the beauty in its higher form in the cult and in praising the deeds and the appearance of Yahweh.⁴ The very nature of Israel's poetry is positioned in relation to religion, although this can hardly be made transparent from a scientific point of view. Religion shapes both the form and style of Israel's poetry.⁵ His conclusion is quoted in full:

We summarize what has been said in a few provisional propositions: (1) For Israel beauty was never something absolute, existing in its own right, but was always a thing unceasingly bestowed on the world by God. (2) Beauty was therefore a datum of faith. (3) Enjoyment of this beauty of God is truly present as early as the hymns, and it is most certainly present in the utterances of the prophets as something anticipated, that is, it is oriented towards an eschatological fulfilment: it is perception in faith and faith perceived. (4) Israel perceived splendour even in the workings of the divine *kenosis* and hiddenness. (5) For Israel beauty was something that happened rather than something that existed, because she understood it as the result of God's action and not of God's being.⁶

Here we are concerned with a vision that is based on Israel's belief. The poetry is subordinated to that belief. This is a special means of expressing this belief. When we regard the relationship between revelation and experience as a standard here as well, we can say p. 261 that belief, together with its experience, creates revelation.⁷ With Walter Zimmerli we come across the enlightening remark that all supplications of the Old Testament prayer, as rendered in the Psalms, presuppose the first commandment. God is not the unknown God. He is the God who revealed himself to Israel in his saving grace. Hence the psalmists' praying of lamentations is also governed by the third commandment. The praise is based on believing the God who revealed and is still revealing himself. 'Every cry for help is stated personally: "You Yahweh." In this form of address the Old Testament faith pays homage to its God even when it cries out from the abyss of despair and is dominated by "why" and "how long?"'.⁸ In the poet's experience what we have is an appeal to the revelation of God. There is indeed talk of revelation, but I would call it indirect revelation. It comes to us by means of the poet's appeal to it.

Claus Westermann talks about three stages in the origin of prayer in our sense of the word. He discusses this subject in the part of his book that deals with 'the response'. Here

³ Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* Volume 1—The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions, Tr. D. M. G. Stalker (Oliver & Boyd: Edinburgh, 1962), pp. 356–370.

⁴ Von Rad, *op. cit.*,

⁵ Von Rad, *op. cit.*,

⁶ More comments on Von Rad can be found in B.J. Oosterhoff, *Feit of intpretatie* (Kampen, 1967).

⁷ More comments on Von Rad can be found in B. J. Oosterhoff, *Feit of interpretatie* (Kampen, 1967).

⁸ Walther Zimmerli, *Grundrisz der alttestamentlichen Theologie* (Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln-Mainz, 1975), 2nd ed., p. 134.

it is specially meant as ‘The Calling to God in the Old Testament’.⁹ The first stage is the short crying out to God, which originates immediately from a specific situation. Some examples given by him can be found in [Exodus 18:10](#), [Judges 15:18](#) and [2 Samuel 15:31](#). In the second stage these separate utterances of prayer, which can be found in numerous places in the Old Testament have been united into a song. ‘All these calls of prayer can without exception become parts of a Psalm. They go into the Psalms as into a form which is made into a whole.’¹⁰ The third stage is that of the long prosaic prayers, like [1 Kings 8](#), [Ezra 9](#) and [Nehemiah 9](#). Likewise, we are faced with revelation here as well, but in the shape of the believer’s answer to God’s revelation. This revision took place in view of the liturgy.¹¹ It would lead too far to discuss the various types of psalms. Likewise, it would be too much to point out the discussion about all these types.¹²

HOW DO REVELATION AND EXPERIENCE RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER IN THE PSALMS?

After these explorations which by no means aim at being complete, we get to the actual theme, namely, the experience of the psalmists as subject-matter for the preaching. How are experience and revelation related in the Psalms and how can this experience, as included in the revelation, be preaching material?

Our point of departure is God’s revelation which is present in the [p. 262](#) Psalms. Very particularly, we are faced with the answer of human beings to God’s revelation to Israel. The answer is given in the struggle to feel God’s hand and to be allowed to go his way and to receive light in the dark.

As a matter of fact, we come across similar reactions all through the Bible. Just to mention the extremes: Adam’s reaction to God’s appearance in the garden of Eden ([Gen. 3:10](#)), to the Bride’s prayer for the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of the Bible ([Rev. 22:17](#) and [20](#)). With this we do not want to say that revelation takes, structurally speaking, the form of a dialogue.¹³ Much as the Bible is the book of encounters and much as God’s revelation is geared to man and requires his response, God still has the first and the last word. H. Jonker phrases this properly: ‘Without doubt God has the first and the last word, but in between he allows people to talk, hears their objections, takes them seriously and sometimes breaks off the conversation (‘Speak no more to me of this matter’) or guides, as a wise father, the foolishness of the people up to a point where wisdom from heaven manifests itself all of a sudden.’¹⁴ God reveals his truth to us, also in the form of a conversation. Revelation does not always take the form of a conversation. There are many words which are directly spoken to men, without their answer being heard. Yet in such words the situation of people is gone into as well. They are addressed right where they are. Sometimes their reactions are reported, but this is not always the case. We may recall the words of the Lord Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount is an example of a situation where

⁹ Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1982), p. 153–154.

¹⁰ Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

¹¹ See Westermann, p. 187 and his two works, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1965) and *The Psalms, Structure, Content, & Message* (Minneapolis, 1967), 1974, 3rd ed.

¹² Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1978), p. 153

¹³ H. Jonker, *En toch preken* (Nijkerk, 1973), p. 48 says that the truth of the Word of God is always the truth in the context of dialogue.

¹⁴ Jonker, *op. cit.*, p. 48 (Quotation translated).

people are addressed, while their responses are scarcely voiced. As an exception to this one may look at the final verses of [Matthew 7:21–23](#). Here the questions asked by men serve to emphasize the seriousness of Jesus' words.

There are, however, also many instances of conversations in very different circumstances, in which both the reactions of people and Jesus' words together determine the conversation.¹⁵ Striking examples are the conversation with the woman of Samaria ([Jn. 4:4–26](#)) and the one with Simon, the Pharisee ([Lk. 7:36–50](#)). There are many more instances of similar conversations. The words of people are components of what Jesus says. Jesus' words are determined also by the answers given by people. Without those answers the conversation would simply not be there at all! In that case, Jesus' words would have been different from those which have been recorded! They have been included in what Jesus wants to pass on and have been made subordinate to his words. In all those conversations Jesus has the first and the last word.

How can one explain the use of reactions of human beings by the revealed word? Revelation is aimed [p. 263](#) at people and requires the reaction of people (in faith). In his condescending goodness God gets so near to people that he even incorporates their reactions, so that his word can get across so much more powerfully and clearly. The fact that answers of human beings are given a place in God's revelation does not mean that human beings are co-partners in constituting that revelation. The essence of that word is that it is intended for people. So, that intention is given extra emphasis because the answers of human beings are—from time to time, not always—included in the revealed word, without the sovereign and authoritative character of that word being infringed upon. God has the first and the last word. For that reason, words of people are of a different nature from the word within which they may have been embedded. Utterances of human beings, in this context, serve to strengthen and underline God's word.

REMEMBERING THE WORKS OF THE LORD BY SPEAKING ABOUT THE PSALMS

In this respect one can also understand that the psalms acquired their position in the worship of Israel. In those psalms it is not just the human experience which is at stake, such as when men were in doubt and how they were able to carry on. What could be the power of such a song for future believers? It would not have had more than a historical or a devotional value. On the contrary, the works of the Lord are remembered in the psalms. One should watch how often an appeal is made to God's deeds of the past, especially in the psalms of despair and darkness.

Thus a powerful consolation is radiated for the Israelite in remembering the works of the Lord. This presents him, time and time again, with the foundation for a new hope and a prospect for the future, even if it is dark both within and around him. To him, remembering the works of the Lord means being guided by it, living out of it and continuously drawing consolation and strength from it. Consequently, it is something different from just meditating on what the Lord did in the past. It means living in the present out of the revelation given by Him.¹⁶

¹⁵ See J. H. Bavinck, *Menschen rondom Jesus* (Kampen, 1936).

¹⁶ B. J. Oosterhoff, 'De daden des Heren gedenken' in *Woord en Kerk*, Theological contributions by the professors of the Theologische Hogeschool der Christlike Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Hogeschool (Amsterdam, 1969), p. 23. (Quotation translated).

Thus whatever comes to pass within such psalms, is also happening to the psalmists themselves. Reading and singing those psalms is a way of remembering the works of the Lord. That is why Israel was able to begin to sing both the individual lamentation and community hymns of praise during worship-time, without this singing having an historical-religious meaning only! Here Israel had to do with revelation, with the works of the Lord which were put into words under the guidance of the Spirit! In this way the singing of psalms is a form of remembering the works of the Lord. What stands out here is that God's works from [p. 264](#) the past are reported, in order to let them be experienced in the present as well, in the midst of doubt and darkness. As a result of that, this song itself is included in the line of God's works which have to be remembered by the congregation.

In the preaching too, one should focus on the works of the Lord. Distinction has been made between formal preaching on the one hand and experiential preaching on the other hand.

The works of the Lord should be the object of preaching, as revealed to us in both the Old and New Testament. And these should find a personal response with us. They should teach us to get to know God in His judgements, when we do not turn towards Him in truth. But, above all, they should teach us to get to know Him in His boundless grace, love for sinners and unmovable loyalty to His covenant, lest we should wait for Him and, as poor sinners, wait on Him alone. The works of the Lord are ever and again a source for faith, hope and charity.¹⁷

As such, the psalms prove to be preaching material as well.

To underline what has been said so far, we would like to point out that the author of the epistle to the Hebrews prefaces quotations from the Psalms by referring to the Spirit as the author.¹⁸

Likewise, it can be understood that texts from the psalms refer to Christ. It is the Spirit of God who prompted those poets.¹⁹ So one has to conclude that what Peter said about the prophets in [1 Peter 1:10-12](#) is true for the psalms as well. Once more we use the distinction between revelation and experience. It is not true that the psalmist's experience plays an equal part in constituting the revelation. The revelation is not dependent on experience; nor is that the case with Jesus' words. His word is sometimes a reaction to the answers of people, either negatively or positively. Their answers are part of the word that he speaks, 'as one having authority, and not as the scribes' ([Matt. 7:29](#)). The experience of believers in the psalms can therefore never be preached without that experience being viewed within the framework of God's revelation through this psalm.

EXPERIENCE IN THE FRAMEWORK OF REVELATION

In our opinion experience is sometimes brought in too early. In that case the sermon starts off with despair. The preacher highlights modern man's despair and sometimes wants to talk his congregation into that despair or exhort it as a 'must'. Anyone who deals with this matter in this way, is guilty of identifying experience as revelation. However much one does not want to, [P. 265](#) that doubt is in fact a normative revelation. The very same thing

¹⁷ Oosterhoff, *art. cit.*, p. 29. (Quotation translated).

¹⁸ See [Hebrews 3:7-11](#), referring to [Psalm 95:7-11](#); [Hebrews 4:7](#) referring to [Psalm 95:7-7](#).

¹⁹ See [Hebrews 1:5-8](#) referring to [Psalm 2:7](#); and [Psalm 104:4](#); [Psalm 45:7-8](#), [Psalm 102:26-28](#) and [110:1](#). Also [Hebrews 2:6-8](#) referring to [Psalm 8:5-7](#), [Hebrews 2:12](#) referring to [Psalm 22:23](#). These quotations can be found in Simon Kistemaker, *The Psalm Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Amsterdam, 1961), pp. 96-133.

can happen when preaching on psalms of praise. The intonation is different, but the structure is the same. One tends to forget that joyful or sad human experience is included in God's revelation.

One should preach on the psalms as one preaches on parables, that is from the turning-point of the parable, where the crux of the matter or the essential message about the kingdom of God is illustrated by the image itself. One could also put it like this: a parable should be preached from the revelation, from the disclosure. When preaching on the psalms, one should not start with the experience. The starting-point should be that which is revealed about God in the psalms. We can put it like this: by the poet's belief and by the appeal to God in the midst of despair, God is still saying to us today: I am still there. Someone who is afflicted by temptation will never call on me in vain!

Of course, the situation of the psalmist has to be mentioned and it has to be outlined in the sermon. But the situation is not the issue of comparison, let alone of application. The message of a sermon on a psalm should be who God wants to be in that darkness, how God wants to be called upon, how God wants to be trusted and believed in, in difficult circumstances.

THE PSALMS IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

The next step is to draw the line from the psalms to Christ in the New Testament. The Lord, the covenantal God, is the Father of Jesus Christ. He is at work. Grace, mercy, goodness and forgiveness have got a christological colouring and contents. It is impossible to think of these qualities without taking the fulfilment of God's promises of Christ Jesus in the Old Testament into consideration. It is important to see how in Luke I the coming of Christ and his forerunner, John the Baptist, is linked to the above-mentioned root words of the Old Testament. If we come across such words in a psalm, we may extend them to Christ. In that case we preach on the psalms in a christological way. Are we allowed to say, along with Dijk, that a poet identifies with the Man of Sorrows in suffering? We would rather not use that expression here. What we do want to say is that the poet appeals to the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ; that he asks for help and salvation for the sake of the work which God wills his Son to do on this earth.

The salvation of God in the psalms is determined in a christological sense, even though there is not clarity yet on the person of Christ. We do get more information on this from the prophets.

The suffering of certain poets has got a typological meaning. In it we can see something of what Christ had to undergo. Examples of this are psalms [22](#) and [69](#). Does this mean that these poets were aware of the fact that they depicted, by means of their own martyrdom, Christ's own way to the cross? There are not easy answers to such questions. Who knows what they knew or saw of their own suffering in relation to that of Christ? Here [p. 266](#) again, we would like to refer to [1 Peter 1:10-12](#). Amongst the psalmists there have been prophets of whom may be said that they 'prophesied of the grace that should come unto you'. Then again, the search for ways and the times of the Spirit who was with them, applies to them as well. They testified of the suffering which was to befall Christ and the glory thereafter. The remarkable thing about this text is that these prophets spoke words of which they could not fully grasp the historical effect. Bolkestein writes:

Already before His coming in the flesh His (=Christ's) Spirit was moving. This Spirit was the secret of the prophets, though they were not aware of it. It does not matter how much

or how little these prophets themselves knew about it. Yet, in reality, Christ's Spirit spoke and worked within them. One could speak of a certain pre-existence of Christ here.²⁰

EXCHANGE OF SUBJECT

Once more we would like to raise the question of the relationship between experience and revelation. How is it possible to do justice to the experience, which is included in the revelation, without raising experience itself to revelation? We already said: whoever wants to start from the experience and wants to convey it, undervalues the revelation. He starts at the bottom, with the human being. That is no true preaching, as that has to start from God's side. There is a theological priority or revelation in preaching.²¹ This has to be respected in preaching on the psalms.

Does this imply that man and his temptations and doubt should be ignored? Again we take the words and works of our Lord Jesus Christ as an example. Those who preach on conversations or miracles of Christ, cannot but include the people concerned in the sermon. How can we do that? They are not the subject of history. They are—if we are allowed to express it like this—the indirect object. Christ is concerned about the service he renders to them in work and deed. That is exactly the position of the poet and his people in the psalms. He speaks in the first person, singular or plural. In the first instance he is the subject, but he who looks at the state of affairs from a theological-homiletic point of view, must come to the conclusion that there is an exchange of subject. The poet calls for God. He speaks, makes supplications and cries out. The psalm is included in the Bible in order to hear the answer which the poet expects from God. Then it is God who speaks and acts. The poet, who was the subject, becomes the addressee, the beneficiary. The speaker becomes the one who is addressed. Only if we carry out this exchange of subject, can we avoid the danger of regarding the poet's experience as a revelation in sermons. From a theological-homiletic point of view [p. 267](#) we are obliged to do so. Then we do justice to the fact that God has the first and the last word, also in a sermon on the psalms, however much man is speaking, both in the Bible and in the sermon.

We can add to that, that calling for God, making supplications in faith, pleading on God's promises and deeds is the way along which the Spirit lets people share in the salvation of Israel's God. We speak about Christ, veiled in the shadows of the old dispensation. As we speak of a christological line in the psalms, we can speak of a pneumatology. It is not proclaimed in terms of man, but as the way in which the Spirit provides support in God when man is in severe doubt. We can repeat what the poet said only if we have first been addressed ourselves by God's revelation in this psalm.

CONCLUSIONS

In summarising the above-mentioned, we reach the following conclusions:

1. One is inclined, when preaching on the psalms, to begin with that which the poet experienced and which becomes apparent in his utterances of doubt, trust and expectation in the process of his struggle of faith. This would mean that the poet's experience would be preaching material. In that case we are preaching on faith as experience, which cannot simply be the intention.

²⁰ M. H. Bolkestein, *De Brieven van Petrus en Judas* (Nijkerk, 1963), p. 42. (Quotation translated).

²¹ For the theological priority of revelation in relation to the discussions on commandment and situation ethics, see my *Wet en evangelie* (Kampen, 1987), pp. 113–115.

2. The Psalms have been included in the Bible as God's revelation. The purpose is to receive the revelation concerning God and mankind, as it is offered to us in the psalms, as the contents of the sermon.
3. God's revelation comes to us in the psalms by means of the incorporation of the believing poet's words. That is the special thing about the psalms. As a matter of fact we come across words spoken by men, which have been included in Jesus speeches, in other parts of the Scriptures, as well as especially in the gospels.
4. When preaching on the psalms we should be aware of the need for an exchange of subject. The psalm has been given a place in the Bible because of the answer which the poet expects from God. One who reads and discusses the psalms, should first grasp what the poet expects and hears from God. In this way he himself becomes the addressee and only then can he talk of the poet's experience in his sermon
5. In the psalms God's virtues and deeds are called on. In that appeal we find God's revelation about himself in the poet's situation.
6. The poet plus his experience can be given room in a sermon, provided that all emphasis is on that which God reveals about himself by means of the appeal of the poet-believer towards God. From the poet's experience it becomes evident in what way the Holy Spirit works in the lives of God's children.

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