

The Nations in the Psalms and the Psalms in the Nations – a response



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Since I was in my early teens I've been aware of the close connection between the book of Psalms and mission. When I was about 14 my Dad went on a short-term trip with our church to visit some congregations in Ghana. His returning flight into Heathrow was flight number 117 and, knowing there were 150 psalms and being *that* kind of a kid, I wondered what Psalm 117 had to say:

¹ Praise the LORD, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.

² For great is his love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.
Praise the LORD. (NIV)

So I had always known that the nations feature in the Psalms, but over the years became increasingly aware of the tensions and complexities concerning the theme.

I would like to thank Gordon for such a stimulating, constructive and clear assessment of the role of the nations in the Psalms. I am sure, like me, many gathered here are grateful for the way you have unravelled what can seem like a very complex set of relationships between God, Israel and the nations.

In particular we are grateful for the journey on which you have taken us through the book of Psalms, modelling so well how we might approach a theme in the psalter canonically.

In my presentation on the Centre for the Study of Bible and Mission I outlined our passion for understanding both mission in the Bible (of which these relationships between God, Israel and the nations are a part), and the Bible in mission.

Having been treated to such a helpful exploration of The Nations in the Psalms, I would now like to ask the question, 'What is the role of the Psalms in the Nations?'

The Bible as product and record of mission

In recent scholarship on the Bible and Mission, and particularly the method of reading the Bible through the lens of mission, as Chris Wright highlighted in our lecture last year, writers refer to the Bible as a product, record and tool of mission.

I would want to suggest that Gordon has illustrated in very helpful ways how the individual Psalms and the Psalter as a whole have emerged from and been shaped by what many would call missional concerns...

- the viability of the people of God in the midst of threatening circumstances;
- God's purposes for humanity and creation;
- The establishment of the kingdom of God in the world;
- Israel's attempts to deal with their encounters with non-Israelite cultures and worldviews.

We have also seen tonight how the Psalter describes some of the ways in which the people of Israel outlined a vision for the nations to come before God in worship and, may we say it, be reconciled with him. This is also closely tied to their future vision of a new David, who of course the New Testament writers understood as referring to Jesus Christ, the one in whom God's mission reaches its climax and fulfilment.

But what of the psalms as a tool of mission?

Here I would suggest a couple of pointers and would invite thoughts and suggestions as well.

Firstly, the psalms have always functioned to shape the people of God as we participate in God's mission. This is true whatever the context you are living and working in. But I think the psalms do something spectacular in this regard. They help us to pray, to pray our true selves and to pray beyond ourselves to those in our own community or elsewhere in the world.

This is how Ian Stackhouse puts it in his book, *The Day is Yours* (see his chapter on Praying the Psalms in this issue of Encounters):

Sometimes when I am praying a psalm a face will appear; someone for whom this Psalm describes actual experience. Other times the words of the Psalm sound for all the world like the latest news bulletin from Kosovo, or the Congo, and so, in a strange way, the ancient liturgy helps me to be more up-to-date than I would otherwise be. Precisely because the world hasn't changed much, and human experience is awful a lot of the time, praying the Psalms, far from representing a retreat into private interiority, is an advance onto the concourse of life. (from *The Day is Yours: Slow Spirituality in a Fast-Moving World*, Paternoster Press, p.95)

I had the pleasure this year of supervising an undergraduate dissertation that looked at the phenomenon of missionary attrition; that is, when cross-cultural workers leave earlier than intended, often (but not always) because of stress and burnout. And what did he recommend as a solution (or at least part of a wider solution)?

Mission agencies should help their personnel learn the language of lament found in the psalms so that they can be real with God and process the whole of their experiences before God.

A second way in which the psalms have been an effective tool of mission is in paving the way to a receptive hearing of the good news of Jesus. Where so many different ideas abound about the nature of God and his engagement with humanity one starting point that some cross-cultural workers use is to read Psalm 139 with their friends. *This* is the God we are talking about, they might say. He knows us profoundly and intimately. And of course this may be just as useful an approach within the UK as in other cultures.

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