Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy:  
Reading the Scriptures   
through the Jubilee Year of Mercy

An exchange with

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Prayer and Mercy in Ancient Israel

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Mercy, the Covenant and   
the God of Abraham

* In the Hebrew Scriptures, God typically acts with *hesed* (חסד)
  + The term is used 248 times in the Hebrew Scriptures
  + 127 of those times, *hesed* is found in the Psalms
* *Hesed* has a wide semantic range, and can be translated as
  + loyalty
  + loving-kindness
  + love
  + grace
  + compassion
  + mercy

Mercy and the Covenant

* Precisely because God is merciful, he establishes a permanent covenant with the children of Abraham
* See Exodus 34:6-7
  + Note the context: God is reestablishing the covenant with Israel (36:10)
  + “The Lord, the Lord, a God of *hesed* and graciousness, slow to anger and abounding in *hesed* and faithfulness”
* God is merciful and God bestows mercy

The Psalms in Israel’s worship

* The Book of Psalms constitutes Israel’s hymnbook
* *Lex orandi, lex credendi*: how we pray shows what we believe
* The worship of Israel as a source for its understanding of God

The Psalms as expressions of communal faith

* Like many hymns, many psalms express the faith of the believing community *qua* community
* This communal faith is expressed by the use of the first person plural
* It is likely that such communal hymns – like the hymnody of Christianity – served simultaneously to express and to reinforce the faith of those who gathered to worship

Psalm 33

* Introduction (verses 1-3): note the double encouragement, (A) to the “righteous” and (B) to the musicians
* Body (verses 4-19)
  + The Lord, the creator (verses 4-9) – the earth is full of his *hesed* (v. 5)
  + The Lord, the ruler of the nations, including Israel (verses 10-12)
  + The Lord, the omniscient (verses 13-15)
  + The Lord, the powerful yet compassionate one (verses 16-19) – the eye of the Lord is upon those who hope in his *hesed*
* Conclusion (verses 20-21): note that “our soul” waits on the Lord, and “our heart” is glad in him, as “we” pray for *hesed* (v. 22)

Psalm 136

* The psalm is responsorial in form, with the congregation supplying the refrain “For God’s *hesed* is everlasting,” and the cantor/choir supplying the versicles
* The body (verses 4-25) rehearses the great deeds of Yahweh
  + Creation (verses 4-9)
  + the Exodus (verses 10-15)
  + the Settlement in the Land (verses 16-32)
  + our (vaguely-articulated) present circumstances (verses 23-24)
  + the sufficiency of food (verse 25)
* The conclusion (verse 26) compactly reiterates the introduction (verses 1-3)
* Might this have been a hymn designed for children?

The Psalms as expressions of an individual’s Faith in God

* Many psalms use the first person singular as the speaker
* Many of these psalms are lamentations
* The miseries that provoke lamentation
* Laments and Temple sacrifices
* Priests as temple functionaries and agents of healing

Psalm 57

* Note the images of danger
  + My enemies “trample” me (57:3B)
  + I lie down among lions with sharp teeth (57:4)
  + My enemies lay traps and dig pits (57:6)
* The one who sings is confident that God will send forth his *hesed* and his faithfulness
* After the *selah* in 57:7, there is, as usual, an abrupt shift in tone
* In the praise that follows, God’s *hesed* is said to be as high as the heavens (v. 10)

Psalm 130

* Invocation (vv 1-2) which comes from “the depths,” an image for watery chaos
* Testimony to divine forgiveness (verses 3-4)
* Resolution to “wait for the Lord” (verses 5-6)
* Command to the community (Israel) to “wait for the Lord” (verses 7-8)
* Note the conviction that “with the Lord there is *hesed*” (v. 7C)

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