

## Introduction

This study attempts to delve deep into the rich and vast field of psalm-poetry and unearth certain significant poetical elements which to a great extent, I think, are the sustaining foundation stones of these very ancient religious songs. Therefore, this is not a pedantic, theological or historical approach to the psalms.

The psalms of the Old Testament, some of which existed from one thousand years before the Christian era, have withstood the onslaught of Time. In spite of numberless translations down the ages, these poems still come to us as alive and as pulsating with life as when King David or the lone shepherd-psalmist first breathed melody into them.

The reading of the psalms has been, though sometimes difficult, a very enriching and a very personal experience. This experience has led me to believe that there are five constituents of poetry in the psalms which may be largely responsible for these ancient poems acquiring a timeless significance and value of their own. These

five elements - "the five I's" as I term them - are:

1. Inspiration
2. Imagination - based largely on Memory of the past.
3. Incantation
4. Image: Simile and Metaphor
5. Intensity.

Each of these is dealt with as a separate chapter. But first, an overview.

The most important component of all great poetry is, Inspiration. Without inspiration, poetry falls short of its higher function: it ceases to be what Sri Aurobindo terms, the "mantra"<sup>1</sup> of the Soul. That certain spiritual prompting in the heart of man, that urge to create, to reveal, to gush forth and to articulate, must be inspiration.

The product of this is, Incarnation, the poetry of speech. Poetry thus inspired has power - the power to move.

The psalms, we know, were composed by men whose lives were less

complex than the modern man's; whose elemental bonds with Nature and her environment had not yet been severed and whose pastoral roots grew deep. They were men whose spiritual awareness was acutely sharp and they found God in every motion of their lives. In the sounds of silence, the voice of the Divine was heard and It incarnated as the poetry of the ever-living psalms. These poems of ancient Israel thus bear testimony to the fact that, "God hath spoken" (ps.62:11. Bible. AV. 628).

The second element of poetry which is crucial to the make-up of the psalms, is, Imagination. This is based largely on the memory of the past. Many times, the psalmist appeals to one's sense of the past and Memory becomes a force that manoeuvres and controls the whole poetic imagination in these sacred songs:

I will call to mind the deeds of the  
Lord;

yea, I will remember thy wonders  
of old.

I will meditate on all thy work,

and muse on thy mighty deeds.(ps. 77:11-12. Bible.

AV. p. 516).

No one is allowed to forget the goodness of God. The ancient poets are constantly stimulated by an awesome sense of history. The great Exodus experience, for instance, is heard and heard again. This is not only a historical event. It can become an experience totally personal as in periods of torment and infliction when faith shatters the chains of bondage to lead one into the "promised land". Hence the poet sings many times along the following lines:

He divided the sea, and caused  
them to pass through; and he made  
the waters to stand as an heap.

In the daytime also he led them  
with a cloud, and all the night with  
a light of fire. (ps. 78:13-14. Bible. AV. p. 637).

This Memory, therefore, has a powerful hold over the psalmists' imagination and as M.L Rosenthal points out, Memory is, "The brooding source, present in every mind, of the desire to hold on to every mind, of the desire to hold on to the full body of our lives, turning it around and around and meditating on it again and again. It is she, who, in poetry, moves the poet to an acutely

intimate recognition and excitement because a moment of experience has been recovered.<sup>2</sup> Chapter II deals with this aspect of Imagination.

Incantation, the third poetical constituent, is primal to primitive religious verse. The effect is magical, hypnotic, enchanting. In psalm 118, the poet sings in thanksgiving to the Lord because "He is good". The whole prayer is sounded in an incantatory mood with the constant emphasis on:

"His steadfast love endures for/ever."

This mode of repetition enhances rhythm, music and meaning. The magical effect is also produced by the use of arresting, value-packed words and phrases which are steeped in wisdom and profound meaning. An example of this is : "The fear of the Lord is the beginning/of wisdom;" (ps.111:10. Bible. RSV. 539). In chapter III, we focus on Incantation.

Chapter IV discusses yet another poetic element, a stronghold by which the psalms have long sustained themselves. This is, the

Image. Specific reference is made to the Simile and the Metaphor which the psalmists use abundantly. As there are a great many of such comparisons, only the more significant ones have been chosen and examined. The images of God, the Enemy and the Psalmist, are prominent in the poems and our discussion centres around them. This is not to suggest that the rest of the comparisons are not noteworthy. Consider psalm 19:4-5 (RSV. 482) where the singer-poet proclaims enthusiastically that God created and also the Sun:

In them he has set a tent for the sun,  
which comes forth like a bridegroom  
leaving his chamber,  
and like a strong man runs its  
course with joy.

This is a simple and direct comparison, yet potent in its effectiveness. A whole new and compact experience is arrested in these dual comparisons. The Sun, we are accustomed to as being masculine. Even in Hebrew, it is so.<sup>3</sup> Thus the Sun is projected in all its fresh and vibrant energy, in all its power and agility. One's imagination triggers off a process of associations that make

up one's life and one is able to look upon the Sun, afresh, from the individual point of view. The psalms are replete with such blazing, visual pictures. Had the psalmist been less exuberant, even done away with apt images, he would not have, so effectively strung a chord in our hearts to produce that "music of awareness"<sup>4</sup> so very essential to life.

Yet another significant facet of these sacred songs, which is common to all good poetry is ,Intensity. This is dealt with in the last chapter. The form of the psalms, being of the lyric, complements the truth that these poems reveal moments of great intensity, of great emotion, all bursting out in floods of anger, hate, fear, joy and gratitude. To the hearer, it is almost an urgent and impulsive communication of an experience that has to be lived to be understood. Take for example, psalm 57, a psalm of suffering, where David, hiding in a cave, from his persecutor, Saul, implores God to help him and save him from the snares of his treacherous enemies:

I lie in the midst of lions  
that greedily devour the sons of  
men;  
their teeth are spears and arrows,  
their tongues sharp swords. (ps. 57:4. Bible.  
RSV. 504)

These short lines convey a sense of great fear combined with feelings of profound distress and hate. The ordinary person can recognise easily these basic, human emotions, no matter how sophisticated he may be. "There is no 'make-believe' in these poems of the Old Testament."<sup>5</sup> All experience stemmed from life lived primitively, simply and intuitively. Thus the poetic utterance is vigorous, sometimes abrupt and mostly forceful, passionate and intense. The psalms have arrested for all generations, significant familiar moments of life which, though common, are highly concentrated with a whole gamut of human emotions. The sacred poems, therefore, still find their relevance in today's world.

This is a general overview of what my research will cover. I am not a scholar of Hebrew nor an authority in the Bible and hence make no claims to historical, religious and archaeological equipment.



No attempt has been made to add new information on the origin and background of the psalms. The focus is on the five literary components, "the five I's", from the vantage point of a layman. Very often, it requires a lay person to "explain" to the other layman, what it is all about. "It often happens that two schoolboys can solve difficulties in their work for one another better than the master can."<sup>6</sup>

Though at times difficult, the first journey through the psalms is perhaps travelled better singly and individually without much religious and historical over-load, so that one way wanderingly, make personal discoveries that would lead one to feel as the psalmist felt and to share in his impulsive outbursts concomitant with his encounters with the Divine. This is how the experience of the psalms become personal and very real for us.

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## Works Cited

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