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Poetry and the Old Testament

As a musician, I'm surrounded by many talented people—artists, singers, song-writers, and everything in between. Although I myself love to play instruments and sing, I never really saw myself as a song-writer. Songwriting is in a whole different category than performance. I've always been quite envious of those who can craft a song from scratch and make it sound beautiful.

One day, during a retreat with my house church, I was sitting in a cabin with one of my friends, crafting a song together as a prayer practice. She is a talented singer-songwriter, but I always found the practice intimidating.

"I think it's really easy for a song to start sounding cheesy," I told her. "I'm always afraid that will happen when I write a song."

She smiled at me for a second before she responded.

"Songs carry so much within them. No one song is the same as another because of the different people involved...the emotions and experiences held within it."

I realized it's why some songs can make people feel so deeply, even songs that might sound similar to other ones. Because every song carries the hearts of the people who wrote it.

I imagine that to be a lot like poetry, especially poetry found within the Hebrew scriptures.

Like music, I see poetry to reflect emotions and experiences, carrying the hearts of the people who wrote it. And it's why no one poem feels the same. Embedded within poetry is every feeling and prayer, every lament and hope. I think the Psalms are a great example of this.

The Book of Psalms comes to us in the form of just that—a book, sacred scripture that has been knitted together by years and traditions, but more importantly, by the Holy Spirit who works within real people and real experiences.

Take Psalm 85, for example. It begins by addressing the "leader"—sometimes translated "music leader"—and invoking the Korahites. By doing so, it ties its poetic words to a tradition, to a people known to be lead musicians in the temple appointed by David (1 Chronicles 6:16-23).

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The psalm starts earnestly. “You, O Lord, favored your land; you restored the condition of Jacob. You bore the iniquity of your people; you covered all their sins. *Selah*” (my translation, vv. 1-2).

Psalm 85 is one of remembrance. It speaks of divine deliverance that the Israelites already experienced, and yet, it also prompts us to think that these words were spoken and written during a time where the Israelites are presently expecting deliverance. In other words, the people await a God who has already delivered on a promise, and they call on God’s faithfulness for their present requests.

If you look closely, you see that the psalm shifts from the past tense to the present, and finally to the future.

“Truth will sprout from the land, and justice will look down from the heavens. Indeed the LORD will give what is good, and our land will give her produce. Justice will walk before God, and it shall set the way for God’s steps” (v. 12-14).

Restored balance enables God to finally walk the land.

Psalm 85 is intriguing for many reasons. Most fascinating, however, is how earnest the words are, yet how incredibly vague the psalm is in its own historical context. It begs for the present people of God to use these words to this very day.

To honor the recent passing of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, someone who understood the power of intertwining poetry and prophecy well, I invoke his words. Here, he speaks specifically about Hosea’s poetry, but Brueggemann’s observance resonates with the entirety of the Hebrew scriptures:

“The world is evoked afresh by this poetic utterance; that is why it keeps uttering among us.”

This is what music, art, poetry does for us. According to Emily Warn, poetry can “leap across and charge the synapse between us and the world, altering both.” No side remains untouched. But something special happens when we invite the divine into our words. As the Israelites experience everything from exile, loss, grief, praise, peace, and joy, we are invited into their world, and they are invited into ours. In doing so, we trust God to bring us together, in order that God makes us and the world whole again.

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