

FOREWORD

The Book of Psalms is unique among the books of the Hebrew Bible. It is the only book that God did not write. If the other books of the Bible are characterized by “Thus says the LORD ...” or “the word of God came to Jeremiah ...,” the psalms represent Israel’s response to being addressed by God and to living in the presence of God.

What do the earliest poets of the Jewish people say when they address their prayers to God? More than any other message, they speak of gratitude. They anticipate, and perhaps influence, the tone of later Jewish liturgy, in which prayers that begin “God, thank you for ...” are preferred to prayers beginning “God, please give me ...” So the author of Psalm 30 begins his poem: “I extol You, O LORD, for You have lifted me up, and not let my enemies rejoice over me” (v. 2). Psalm 116, part of the *Hallel* sequence, reads in part: “Be at rest, once again, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you ... How can I repay the LORD for all His bounties to me?” (Ps. 116:7, 12).

For the prophets, the Temple of Jerusalem represented the religious establishment and the ever-present danger of religion being defined exclusively as formal ritual observance. But to the average Israelite whose feelings are captured in the poetry of the psalms, there was no greater privilege, no deeper religious experience, than being allowed to come into God’s presence by entering the sacred precincts of the Temple: “O LORD, I love Your temple abode, the dwelling place of Your glory” (Ps. 26:8); “I rejoiced when they said to me, ‘We are going to the House of the LORD’” (Ps. 122:1).

But we misread the psalms if we think of them only as page after page of pious words uttered by pious people. There are psalms of rage, psalms of anguish and religious doubt, psalms that wonder whether God has forgotten His people: “How long, O LORD; will You ignore me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?” (Ps. 13:2); “We have heard, O God, our fathers have told us the deeds You performed in their time, in days of old ... Yet You have rejected and disgraced us; You do not go out with our armies. You make us retreat before our foe” (Ps. 44:2, 10–11).

The psalms are an encyclopedia of the range of religious emotions. In them, we find expressions of joy and confidence alongside outbursts of fear and anger, feelings of guilt and unworthiness followed by protestations of innocence and the serenity of being invited to “dwell in the House of the LORD forever.” But although the psalms are examples of religious genius, using words and images with immense skill, I would insist that reading the psalms is a right-brain, emotional experience at least as much as it is a left-brain, verbal-intellectual one. We don’t read the psalms for their theology or their intellectual content so much as we read them in order to see the world as the Psalmist saw it, a world that, despite its pain and unfairness, is suffused with the presence of the Living God.

Some of us will find God in the words of the psalms; some of us will find God in their music, their mood; and others will find God in the psalms’ imagery, the pictures that will be summoned up in our minds as we engage them. That is why Debra Band’s illustrations are such an appropriate accompaniment and supplement to the Hebrew and English texts, ensuring that the insights of the poetry of ancient Israel will reach our souls as well as our minds. “Like a hind crying for water, my soul cries for You, O God; my soul thirsts for God, the living God” (Ps. 42:2–3).

Harold S. Kushner
Natick, Massachusetts