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AN APOLOGIST'S EVENING PRAYER: *Reflections on the Psalms* and Lewis's Legacy

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ABSTRACT:

Reflections on the Psalms is one of C. S. Lewis's least read but most controversial books. Two issues it raises deserve critical reflection.

First, commentators on this book have had a role in perpetuating what Victor Reppert calls "the Anscombe legend": that Lewis was so embarrassed by Elizabeth Anscombe's critique of the argument for the self-refuting character of naturalism in *Miracles* that he gave up rational apologetics. Critics of *Reflections* often mention that it was Lewis's first work of popular theology since *Miracles* in a way that seems to support the myth. Reppert set the record straight in *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003). Further consideration of the claims often made about *Reflections* forms a footnote that supports Reppert's case.

Second, in *Reflections* Lewis has his most extended treatment of the nature of Scripture and its inspiration. In it he satisfies neither theological liberals nor conservatives. A fresh examination of his argument reveals both its strengths and its weaknesses.

INTRODUCTION

"I have never been made so uncomfortable by a book," said Byron Lambert to the New York C. S. Lewis Society in 1970.¹ Whether for Lambert's reason---that it revealed his own "moral immaturity"---or because it seems to challenge doctrines held dear by a large part of Lewis's fan base, *Reflections on the Psalms*² has often produced such a reaction. Never one of Lewis's most popular books and deeply disturbing to many of his American Evangelical readers, *Reflections* also provokes words of deep appreciation. An anonymous early reviewer typically called it "charming and urbane," a "literary masterpiece" because it reflected Lewis's "accustomed skill."³ James M. Houston includes *Reflections* along with *Letters to Malcolm*⁴ as part of Lewis's "substantial contribution to the theology of prayer."⁵ And Perry Bramlett echoes many even of the book's critics when he says that it is "full of interesting, provocative, and convincing observations as well as the genuine piety that enriches Lewis's religious works." By showing the reader "how to enjoy, appreciate, and learn from the psalms," Lewis succeeded in doing his part to keep both Bible and Psalter in the minds of Christendom.⁶

How does a book that can do so many good things also make many of its readers profoundly uncomfortable? That is the question we must try to answer.

HISTORY OF COMPOSITION

The idea for a book on the Psalms was suggested to Lewis by his friend Austin Farrer in 1957, at a time when Lewis was out of ideas for a new book and worried about his wife, Joy's, illness and his own health.⁷ He wrote to Arthur Greaves from Magdalene College, Cambridge, on November 27, 1957, that "I don't think I'll ever be able to take a real walk again,"⁸ referring to the effects of osteoporosis. Farrer's suggestion must have had a revitalizing effect, on Lewis's mind at least. He discussed the contents of the book with Joy and Farrer during the long vacation of 1957. In the same letter to Greaves he mentions that "I've been writing nothing but academic work except for a very unambitious little work on the Psalms, which is now finished and ought to come out next spring."⁹ It was actually published on the eighth of September, 1958. Eleven thousand copies were sold in England before publication, which was for the time an impressive number for a religious paperback. Lewis biographer George Sayer reports that the original reviews were "tepid,"¹⁰ but some were enthusiastic, as have been many of the references since.

A historical footnote to the composition of *Reflections* that demands special attention is the way the apparent hiatus of books of expository theology by Lewis in the decade from 1947 to 1957 has been used to propagate what Victor Reppert calls "the Anscombe legend."¹¹ The idea is that Lewis was so embarrassed by Elizabeth Anscombe's critique at the Oxford Socratic Club of his argument for the self-refuting character of naturalism in *Miracles*¹² that he gave up rational apologetics from then on. Reppert has given us a detailed refutation of the Anscombe legend in general terms which we need not repeat here. But we do need to examine the way in which Lewis scholars have used *Reflections on the Psalms* in support of the legend and see if there are flaws in their arguments.

Humphrey Carpenter gives a succinct summary of the claims that have been made in this regard and how they relate to *Reflections*:

Lewis had learnt his lesson [from the debate with Anscombe]: for after this he wrote no further books of Christian apologetics for ten years . . . and when he did publish another apologetic work, *Reflections on the Psalms*, it was notably quieter in tone and did not attempt any further intellectual proofs of theism or Christianity.¹³

George Sayer, usually Lewis's most sagacious biographer, repeats the claim even more starkly: *Reflections* was Jack's "first religious work" since *Miracles* and the "humiliation" he received in the debate with Anscombe.¹⁴ Bramlett unfortunately picks the claim up and repeats it in the widely used *C. S. Lewis Reader's Encyclopedia*: *Reflections* was "the first religious work since *Miracles* (1947)."¹⁵

Now, these claims, stated as if they were simple facts and not tendentious interpretations, are quite strange. This legend seems to grow in the telling, morphing from (at first) a limited move away from "rational apologetics" to a decade-long abandonment of "religious works," all stemming from one debate which was actually considered a draw by many of the people in attendance. Not only is the thesis implausible, it runs afoul of some rather inconvenient facts.

For example, accepting this account of Lewis's career and the place of *Reflections* in it would entail, to say the least, some rather peculiar interpretations of *Surprised by Joy* (1955).¹⁶ Certainly a book that focuses on the experience that led Lewis back to faith in God qualifies as a religious work. And a book that analyzes those experiences so rigorously in terms borrowed from thinkers like Alexander, Bevan, and Otto¹⁷ qualifies as rational, just as a book that is essentially an *apologia pro vita sua* (defense of one's life) qualifies as a work of apologetics, especially when what it sets out to explain is precisely the combination of reason and imagination that constitutes Lewis's unique approach to Christian writing—the very same combination he had less clearly called "reason and romanticism" in his earliest Christian book, *The Pilgrim's Regress*.¹⁸

Not only does *Surprised by Joy* not fit very well into the scenario of the Anscombe legend, but what are we to make of the essays collected in books like *God in the Dock*¹⁹, several of which are religious and even rational apologetics and written during this period? Not only that, but the Narnia books no less than the earlier Space Trilogy contain set pieces of rational apologetics, like the famous conversation between Puddleglum and the Green Witch in *The Silver Chair*.²⁰

The truth is that C. S. Lewis's career and his books—scholarly and popular, non fiction and fiction—are all of a piece.²¹ There was development in Lewis's thinking, of course,²² but there was no radical departure from his basic commitment to an approach to faith in which mind and heart, reason and imagination, rigorous thinking and personal piety, so often estranged in modern Christian experience, are reconciled.

If this view is correct, then we need another explanation for the apparent lull in popular expository theology in Lewis's career between *Miracles* and *Reflections on the Psalms*. We have already seen that the hiatus is in fact only apparent, but there is still a relative lack of productivity in this area between 1947 and 1957 to be accounted for. A number of factors could have contributed. There was the disruption of the move from Oxford to Cambridge to assume the new chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature in 1954. By the end of the period in question Lewis was in declining health. Corbin Scott Carnell attributes a “falling off in Lewis's productivity and possibly in his powers” to the death of Charles Williams in 1945.²³ Certainly Lewis owed a lot to the inspiration and encouragement of his friends. The regular Thursday evening meetings of the Inklings in his rooms at Magdalene ceased in October of 1949, though the Tuesday lunch meetings at the Eagle and Child pub continued for some time afterwards.²⁴ But the factor that probably carries the most weight, indeed, which would have been sufficient all by itself to account for everything, was the fact that this was the decade in which Lewis was working on his most time consuming and backbreaking scholarly project, the magisterial Sixteenth Century volume of *The Oxford History of English Literature*.²⁵

We have already seen that Lewis wrote to Arthur Greaves in 1957 that he had been writing “nothing but academic work” except for his “unambitious little work on the Psalms.”²⁶ His comment to Greaves was an apt summary of Lewis's feeling about the decade just past, when the bulk of the “academic work” had been his history of Sixteenth-Century English literature. It is a massive tome of 696 pages, including a thirty-three page chronological table and ninety pages of bibliography. To write it, Lewis first read everything in that bibliography. Sayer refers to the “immense amount of reading” involved because Lewis “refused to give an opinion on a book he had not read.”²⁷ It was an all-consuming project. Lewis was engaged to write the volume in 1944; he did not finish the first draft until 1952. Revisions and preparing the bibliography took another year, and the book was finally published in the autumn of 1954.²⁸ Lewis frequently complained about the sheer amount of work involved, and jokingly referred to the book by the series acronym, OHEL—pronounced as if it were the expletive referring to the place of eternal punishment. Significantly, Roger Lancelyn Green reports that Lewis told him toward the end of the project that he was “longing for the day when he would be able to turn away from ‘this critical nonsense and write something really worthwhile—theology and fantasy.’”²⁹ The fantasy would be the Narnia series; the theology included *Reflections on the Psalms*.

This may have seemed a rather long digression, but it has an important point. It is clear that, contrary to the claims of a number of commentators, we should not see the apparent gap in Lewis's production of popular theology between 1947 and 1957 as having resulted from any crisis in his thinking, nor should we see his return to that genre in *Reflections on the Psalms* as a new departure with a different emphasis and a more subdued approach. To read *Reflections* thus is to misunderstand its nature and its place in Lewis's life and in the Lewis canon. He had matured, no doubt; but the author of *Reflections* is the same Lewis with the same insistent wholeness of vision that his readers have met in the better known works of earlier decades.

Reflections on the Psalms should therefore be read with the expectation that it will be continuous with Lewis's other works of popular theology. Lambert indeed notes that the book is

“implicitly apologetic,” that is, “the very difficulties that Lewis addresses . . . are the difficulties seized on habitually by unbelievers to throw doubt on the inspiration of the Bible.”³⁰ It has the same strengths and weaknesses as those earlier works and is written from essentially the same point of view. Some of those views which Lewis’s more conservative Christian readers find troubling—his concept of biblical inspiration, for example—are harder to ignore here, but their exposition is consistent with positions he had hinted at earlier.³¹ To that exposition we shall now turn.

SUMMARY

Lewis begins chapter I, “Introductory,” by denying that *Reflections* is a work of scholarship. It is one layman sharing with others things he has found helpful in reading the Psalms. His typically self-effacing explanation for this approach is that one schoolboy can often solve difficulties for another better than the master can. But while he claims only to be “comparing notes” and disavows any intention to “instruct,” it soon becomes apparent that Lewis is at least an older and more experienced schoolboy, able to help us novices with much more than just the odd trick he has picked up to get us through long division. He reminds us that the psalms are poems meant to be sung and gives us a simple but clear and helpful primer in Hebrew poetic parallelism, showing that our Lord himself had absorbed this style of speaking from his environment and from his mother, the author of the Magnificat. And Lewis lets us know that he will begin with characteristics of the psalms that many readers have found difficult, and that he will base his studies on the version Anglicans find in the Book of Common Prayer, that of Coverdale. With these preliminaries out of the way, we are ready to begin.

Chapter II deals with “‘Judgment’ in the Psalms.” Christians think of judgment in terms of a court in which they are the defendants in need of God’s mercy. But often in the psalms the scenario is rather a court in which the psalmist is the plaintiff, asking for a righteous decision to protect him from his enemies. This situation reflects a common human complaint from which modern Westerners have been mostly spared: the difficulty of the “small man” getting his case heard at all, given the levels of corruption, the legions of hands out for bribes, he must go through even to get a hearing. We need to think about both concepts of judgment. Christians can benefit from the Jewish version by picturing themselves as the defendants, i.e., asking if they have wronged anyone, and by remembering that being in the right and being righteous are not the same thing.

Chapter III turns to the “The Cursings,” or what are technically called the imprecatory psalms. Lewis looks the problems presented by these psalms squarely in the face, with no attempt to soften the impression they can make: “In some of the psalms the spirit of hatred strikes us in the face like the heat from a furnace.”³² Examples include the blessing pronounced in the “otherwise beautiful” 137 on one who would dash a Babylonian baby’s head against a stone, or even the line in the familiar 23rd where God prepares a table before the psalmist in the presence of his enemies. Lewis comments, “The poet’s enjoyment of his present prosperity would not be complete unless those horrid Joneses (who used to look down their noses at him) were watching it all and hating it.” The “pettiness and vulgarity” of this sentiment is “hard to endure.”³³

The dilemma as Lewis sees it is that “We must not either try to explain [the cursing psalms] away or to yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious.”³⁴ Instead, we can understand that the writers lived in a more barbaric but less insincere age and learn to see the reality of our own hearts in those feelings they felt no need to hide. We can come to understand something of the natural result of injuring another human being: we tempt the injured person to such hatred. We can come to realize that one reason that the Jews cursed more bitterly is that they took right and wrong more seriously, that what we think of as our greater compassion may really be a culpable

absence of the capacity for indignation. And when we have factored out the forbidden hatred of the sinner which taints them, we can still hear the Word of God in these passages teaching us something about His hatred of sin itself.

Chapter IV, “Death in the Psalms,” notices the surprising lack of emphasis on—or even, perhaps, belief in—a future life in the psalms. The dead, for example, can no longer thank God or even remember him (30:10 [*sic*; actually 30:9 in KJV], 6:5, etc.). The Jews were surrounded by people who were very much concerned about the after life; the Egyptians could have been said to be obsessed with it. But apparently God did not want his people to be like that. He did not want them to worship him for the sake of eternal happiness but for what he is. Only after they had learned to desire him for that does a clear revelation of the next life come to them.

In chapter V Lewis turns from those elements in the psalms that he finds problematic to those which make them a sheer delight. “The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express that same delight in God which made David dance.”³⁵ And they do this “perhaps better than any other book in the world.”³⁶ The ancient Jews, who did not yet know Christ, had less reason to love God than we do, yet they express an exuberant “appetite” for God that few of us rise to. And this tells us something about the God we both adore.

Chapter VI is entitled “Sweeter than Honey.” It is a phrase the Hebrew poets applied often to the Law of God. They had almost the same enthusiasm for God’s commandments as for God himself. This is an attitude modern people find hard to empathize with. How can one sincerely like prohibitions? But part of what the poet meant when he said he delighted in the law is similar to what we would mean in saying that we loved history or English or science. When this love goes bad it becomes Pharisaism, but the psalms can help us recover the innocent love of the Law before it was corrupted by self righteousness. They can remind us that “The order of the Divine mind, embodied in the Divine Law, is beautiful. What should a man do but try to reproduce it, so far as possible, in his daily life?”³⁷

We might have thought we were done with the “problem” psalms, but chapter VII, “Connivance,” strangely returns to them. The problem here is the many psalms in which the psalmist professes to hate God’s enemies. The dangers of such an attitude, as well as its apparent contradiction of the New Testament teaching that we are to love our enemies, are obvious. But we may also ask whether a society like our own in which there is no social sanction for being a scoundrel is not equally unhealthy. We can use these psalms to redress that imbalance and cause us to ask ourselves when taking a stand against evil might be our duty.

Chapter VIII examines the psalmists’ attitude toward “Nature.” Like other ancient peoples, the Hebrews lived close to the soil. Unlike them, they believed in creation. When nature is a created thing, she is emptied of divinity; but this frees her to function as a symbol for the Divine, as a carrier of messages from the truly Other. For, if the thunder is the voice of Zeus, it is still not a voice from beyond the world (Zeus not being transcendent in the same way a true creator God would be). Thus, by emptying nature of divinities, the doctrine of creation ironically fills her with Deity, for she is now his handiwork.

Chapter IX offers “A Word about Praising.” Lewis expects that most readers will not have had the difficulty he finds in the praise psalms, especially with their constant exhortations for us to praise God. For a while, it seemed to Lewis to make God seem like a vain tyrant who liked to be surrounded by toadies. But then he noticed that it is sometimes appropriate to say that a picture or a sunset deserves or demands our admiration. We mean that admiration is the correct or appropriate response on our part to such an object. (Well-read Lewis readers will cross reference the arguments in favor of objective value in *The Four Loves* and *The Abolition of Man*.) Lewis also noticed that all true enjoyment spontaneously overflows in praise; we are not satisfied until we have talked about the painting or poem that moved us. Well, God is the most deserving object of all, so that to truly love him, to be truly awake and alive to him, is to praise him. We are exhorted so often to praise him not because he needs it, but because we do: it is the ultimate fulfillment of our creaturely natures.

Chapter X, “Second Meanings,” introduces a new topic which will occupy Lewis until the end of the book. Christians have not tended to limit themselves to the psalms as they were presumably understood originally, but have seen second or hidden meanings in them having to do with the central truths of the Christian faith, so that the full significance of these texts is only discernible after the fact in the light of the New Testament. The modern mind is rightly suspicious of such meanings, for anyone who is clever enough can read almost anything into any writing. Nevertheless, Christians cannot just abandon the possibility that the original writers might have truly said more than they could know. Statements that turn out to be true in ways the speaker could not have anticipated sometimes happen by luck. They can also happen because the unanticipated truth is an extension of a real insight—as if a person who noticed that the higher a mountain is the longer it retains its snow should imagine a mountain so high that it never lost it. If he then discovered such mountains, e.g., the Alps, in the world, the similarity between them and his imagined mountain would be more than just luck. The anticipations of Christian truths in pagan mythology, e.g., the dying god, might be resemblances of this kind.

Chapter XI, “Scripture,” continues the line of thought begun in chapter X. If even pagan writings can anticipate the New Testament in ways that are not merely accidental, how much more should we expect the Old Testament Scriptures to do so? For they are “inspired.” This raises the question of the nature of biblical inspiration. Lewis neither rejects all accounts of the supernatural automatically like a theological liberal, nor does he accept every word of Scripture as literally true like what he calls a Fundamentalist. Imperfect human materials, including perhaps pagan legends, are “taken into the service” of the Word of God. Inspiration was a “divine pressure” on the process of retelling. The result was “God’s word” as Lewis understands it:

The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naivety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not “the Word of God” in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God; and we (under grace, with attention to tradition and to interpreters wiser than ourselves, and with the use of such intelligence and learning as we have) receive that word from it not by using it as an encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message.³⁸

If the Old Testament has been so “taken up,” we cannot preclude the possibility that it could have been meant to refer to Christ. Moreover, we have Christ’s own authority for taking it so.

Having laid a foundation for doing so in chapters X and XI, Lewis uses his final chapter, “Second Meanings in the Psalms,” to look at the messianic references in the psalms. Psalms examined include 110, 68, 45, and 22. Christ’s interpretations of the psalms were not controversial at the time in his taking them messianically, but rather in his identifying the messianic figure with Isaiah’s Suffering Servant and in claiming to be both figures himself. Finally, the messianic application to Christ turns out not to be arbitrary but to spring “from depths I had not expected.”³⁹

ANALYSIS

Perhaps the best way of coming to understand both the strengths and the weaknesses of *Reflections on the Psalms* is to return to our initial question: why does this book make so many of Lewis’s readers profoundly uncomfortable? We are not made uncomfortable by a bad book, or even necessarily by a book with which we disagree. But what if we find a trusted author who seems at points to be undermining the very things we are used to seeing him defend? And what if this book is so full of his many virtues that we cannot dismiss it as an aberration? And what if,

worst of all, our problems with it are inextricably bound up with those very virtues? That qualifies as an uncomfortable reading experience indeed. While many of Lewis's readers may find this a discussion not strictly necessary, a vast number of his most devoted fans—conservative American Evangelicals, for example—will recognize the reaction just described as their own.

If what these readers see as weaknesses flow from the book's strengths, let us begin with the strengths. Lewis's whole career had established him as one of the best people in the world at performing two services that are combined in *Reflections*. First, he can teach us how to read poetry, especially kinds of poetry we are not used to, and do it without making heavy sailing of it. Think of *A Preface to Paradise Lost* and the essay on "The Alliterative Meter," two of the best examples of such instruction ever written.⁴⁰ Second, he can give us the background equipment we need to read ancient literature with understanding, as he had done superbly in *The Allegory of Love* and the lectures that were posthumously published as *The Discarded Image*.⁴¹

While Lewis claims not to be instructing us but only comparing notes, his notes end up being quite instructive. Lambert was justified in saying that *Reflections* reveals Lewis as "a luminous teacher of poetry," and his description of the explication of Psalm 19 is a good summary of the kind of reading that awaits us throughout the book:

In the course of showing us this Lewis has taken us on a tour of the parched Palestinian countryside, given us a lesson in cultural history, introduced us briefly to modern poetry, made a study in the psychology of religion, developed a commentary on the psalm, and, best of all, taught us how to read the rest of them.⁴²

Chad Walsh concurs. In *Reflections* Lewis "rescues" the psalms for the honest reader. "It is a remarkable book, sketching out and demonstrating a fruitful approach to one of the most beautiful—and perplexing—books in the Bible."⁴³ In like manner C. S. Kilby sees it as an "important idea" in *Reflections on the Psalms* that the Bible has "a creative rather than an abstractive quality."⁴⁴ The psalms are poems.

Truly this is Lewis at his best. He reminds his audience—lay Bible readers—of a fact that is so obvious that many of them have forgotten it. "Most emphatically the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry."⁴⁵ He then in just a couple of pages has a lucid explanation of Hebrew poetic parallelism which, by comparing it with well known passages in English poetry, gives his lay readers just enough to get on with, without burdening them with the technical details. Despite his protestations of amateur status, Lewis the professor is seen as well here as anywhere, instructing us with such gentle ease that it actually feels like we've only been comparing notes with a schoolfellow. Only a master teacher can make significant learning seem so effortless.

Lewis is equally adept at enabling us to enter the mindset of ancient people. He does this with his characteristically deft use of apt analogy. In the Christian view of judgment, the believer is in the dock needing God's mercy; in the typical presentation in the psalms, the speaker is the plaintiff wanting God to redress injustice. Every ancient temple was a slaughterhouse—but if it smelled of blood, it had also the festive smell of roast meat. Like the relentless desert sun, the Law finds us out in the most shadowy hiding places of our hearts. The publicans were the Palestinian Vichy or collaborationists. Both as a teacher of poetry and as a tour guide to lost cultures, Lewis gets us closer to being able to hear the psalms as they were meant to be heard.

A third strength of this book is the way in which Lewis's uncompromising commitment to what he understands of Christian morality and truth lead him to look without flinching at the most difficult problems facing modern readers of the Psalms. He will not allow himself to opt for easy solutions or to paint over the problems with pious language. Again we see the continuity

with Lewis's earlier Christian writings. This is the Lewis of *The Problem of Pain*, or even more so, perhaps, the Lewis of the essay "Petitionary Prayer: A Problem without an Answer."⁴⁶

It is, however, this very strength which gives rise to perplexity, especially when Lewis is dealing with the two most intractable problems, the cursing psalms (chapter III) and those in which the psalmist expresses hatred of God's enemies (chapter VII). Surely Lewis is right to eschew easy answers: "We must not either try to explain [the cursing psalms] away or to yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious."⁴⁷ Yet it is easy to feel that he has painted the picture worse than it is or ignored some obvious ameliorating factors.

Take for example the psalms in which the speaker professes to hate, not just evil, but evil people, and to avoid even associating with them, culminating in the declaration of 139:21-22, "Do I not hate those who hate Thee, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against Thee? I hate them with the utmost hatred; they have become my enemies" (NASB). Though Lewis admits that the toleration of evil in modern times is equally problematic (indeed, he rightly sees these psalms as a useful corrective to it), and though he rightly sees the danger of self righteousness and Pharisaism in such attitudes, he also says that "this evil is already at work" in the Psalms themselves.⁴⁸ Is this conclusion not reached a bit too quickly?

Something Lewis never mentions in this discussion is the common Old Testament idiom of hatred as a metaphor for rejection. God himself says that He has loved Jacob but hated Esau (Malachi 1:2, 3). This does not mean that God felt personal animosity toward Esau, but it is a metaphorical way of stating that He had chosen Jacob and rejected Esau as the bearer of the Abrahamic covenant. The statement in Genesis 29:31 that Leah was hated is qualified and interpreted by the fact that verse 30 has just said that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. To be loved less is still to be loved. The obvious meaning is that Rachel, not Leah, was Jacob's first choice, his preference. We are not necessarily required by this language to believe that he actually despised, held animosity for, treated with overt hostility, or even strongly disliked a woman who, after all, kept bearing him children. (This perspective goes far, by the way, toward explaining certain hard passages in the New Testament, such as the statement that disciples of Jesus must "hate" their father and mother.) It is clear that in biblical language hatred is often not meant literally but rather as a metaphor for rejection, sometimes (as in the case of Leah) not even an absolute rejection. To recognize this possibility certainly puts the language of the psalms in a different light.

Now, one would expect a person with Lewis's sensitivity to poetry to have noticed such a metaphorical usage, and his failure to do so is as puzzling as the readiness of a strong Christian apologist to read Scripture as not only enshrining but encouraging moral imperfection. But there is more puzzlement awaiting us. Psalm 139 is attributed to David. What if he is speaking at this moment, not as a private person, but as the king? What if he is speaking as the one responsible to uphold right and justice in the nation? Then there is a very legitimate sense in which God's enemies are by that fact his as well.

Lewis's failure to consider adequately the possibility of an official or corporate rather than a private voice in the psalmist is possibly explained by yet another puzzling statement from the introduction. The psalms were written by many poets at different dates. "Some, I believe, are allowed to go back to the reign of David; I think certain scholars allow that Psalm 18 . . . might be by David himself."⁴⁹ This is a strangely meek acceptance of the results of negative biblical criticism from the man who two years later would write "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,"⁵⁰ the classic explanation of why we should not be overly impressed by the pronouncements of the so-called "higher" critics of the New Testament. One can only guess that, while Lewis's classical training made him feel sufficiently at home in the world of the New Testament confidently to see through the pretensions of negative scholarship there, in the less familiar world of Semitic studies his characteristic deference to those known as experts made him more vulnerable. Others have since done for Old Testament criticism what Lewis did for the

New Testament.⁵¹ Had Lewis, in keeping with his own advice in “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” been more skeptical of the skeptics,⁵² he might have thought more concretely about David’s own situation in his interpretation of Psalm 139.

I am not suggesting that such considerations are capable of solving all of the problems Lewis raises. But they help a great deal, even in the cursing psalms. Lewis complains of the vulgarity of 23:5, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” But if we seriously think of this poem as coming from the mouth of David, it is easier to believe that vindication, rather than one-upping the horrid Joneses, is what is in view. Again, if 109 is by David, the enemies can be seen not just as personal enemies but as the foes of Israel and of peace, and the curses not as the mere expression of personal vindictiveness but the prophetic pronouncement of God’s judgment on the unrepentant troublemakers of the land. There remain the blessing on infanticides of 137:9, which is much more difficult to justify, and the general dangers of making these curses our own which Lewis rightly wrestles with. The discomfort comes not from the fact that Lewis forces us to wrestle with such problems but from the not wholly unjustified feeling that there is more to be said on behalf of the biblical writers than he allows for.

For conservative believers, unease also attaches itself to the general view of Scripture and the relationship of the reader to the authority of the Bible not only implied by these chapters but spelled out in chapter XI. Robert Merchant summarizes Lewis’s lesson on how to read the problem psalms and their “expression of pure hatred”: “What shall we do with it? Toss it out? Consume it whole? No, says Lewis, don’t toss it out, yet don’t take it as it is. Transform it, and then it becomes delightfully nourishing.”⁵³ But on what basis are we to transform it? On the basis of a notion of what the author *should* have said picked and chosen from other parts of Scripture? If Scripture itself is not our authority for what is right, how do we avoid the problem of a “canon within the canon”? If we ourselves have to discern that canon within the canon, have we not ourselves become the canon? Then the authority of Scripture dissolves completely. How can Lewis feel free to criticize the psalmists’ morality and yet avoid these problems?

In Chapter XI, “Scripture,” Lewis tries to explain his view of biblical inspiration as an answer to such questions. Because he is not a modernist—one who automatically rejects as unhistorical any narrative containing the supernatural—people often assume he is a Fundamentalist, i.e., one who believes that “every sentence of the Old Testament has historical or scientific truth.”⁵⁴ Instead, Lewis thinks that much of the Old Testament is myth, gradually sharpening its focus until, without losing its mythical quality, it becomes history in the incarnation of Christ. He conceives of the inspiration of the Old Testament as a “Divine pressure”⁵⁵ on the process of human retellings of pagan myths, giving us eventually a story of real creation instead of pagan theogony and not completely accidental anticipations of the coming of Christ. The end result “carries” the Word of God, which we can receive from the “overall message,” while still being free to question individual statements: “The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naivety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing psalms) wickedness are not removed.” Thus the Bible is not “truth in systematic form—something we could have tabulated and memorized and relied on like the multiplication table”⁵⁶

Echoing Lewis’s perception of Fundamentalism, Walter Ramshaw writes,

I was raised in a tradition which vigorously insisted on a doctrine of “verbal inspiration”—by which was meant that every word of Scripture had been dictated by God. . . . As a consequence, one was obliged to maintain that the Scriptures were accurate and correct in all respects. . . . It is, of course, impossible for a thoughtful person to maintain this position without indulging in prodigies of mind-bending ratiocination.⁵⁷

This is all well and good—except that “Fundamentalists” (and their living heirs, Evangelicals, as well as conservative Roman Catholics) will feel that their position in being

rejected has been horribly caricatured, since their more informed teachers have never held any such thing. The notion, for example, that “plenary inspiration” and “the mechanical dictation theory” are synonymous is simply ignorant. The so-called Fundamentalists’ actual tradition as summarized in the 1978 “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” maintains that “We must pay the most careful attention to [the Bible’s] claims and character as a human production.” As a result,

History must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: Since, for instance, nonchronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Biblical writers. When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.⁵⁸

How Lewis would have responded to a more nuanced version of the doctrine of inerrancy than he was apparently ever exposed to we will never know. The point here is to understand that in rejecting that doctrine he is rejecting a straw man.⁵⁹ This realization must be part of a full evaluation of Lewis as a Christian apologist and teacher of the church, as well as part of a full evaluation of *Reflections on the Psalms*.

Though many of Lewis’s readers are surprised by what they find in *Reflections*, it represents no real departure from Lewis’s views in earlier books. There is nothing inconsistent with the view of Scripture presented here in *Miracles*, *The Problem of Pain*, or “Myth Became Fact.”⁶⁰ His view of inspiration is noticed here because Lewis actually spells it out and because it allows him to be critical of biblical writers in unaccustomed ways. In Lewis’s approach to the New Testament there is no practical difference between him and those who have a high view of Scripture. As he explained to C. S. Kilby in a personal letter, it matters more whether some events literally happened than others, and “the ones whose historicity matters are, as God’s will, those where it is plain.”⁶¹ By the time of the New Testament, myth had become fact. (This of course begs for more conservative readers the question whether the first Adam might not also have been myth become fact). Thus, because he was usually focused on the New Testament, Lewis was—a believer might say providentially—protected in most of his religious writings from departing from the high road of “mere Christianity.” Here he is aware that he has not quite been able to include fully all of his Fundamentalist and Roman Catholic readers. And the book suffers from it.

Nevertheless, *Reflections on the Psalms* remains a valuable part of the Lewis canon. For all the positive reasons discussed above, it succeeds in helping us read the Psalms better and with fuller understanding, even for those readers who are troubled by some of its analysis. It contributes to our understanding of Lewis’s theology and helps to round out our view of his strengths and weaknesses as a Christian thinker. Best of all, it sometimes rises to an ability to help the Psalmists do what they can do so well: lead us in the worship and adoration of God. In not knowing Christ, the Old Testament writers knew less reason for loving God than we do, Lewis reminds us. “Yet they express a longing for Him, for His mere presence, which comes only to the best Christians or to Christians in their best moments.” Lewis in his best moments in this book helps them to lead us into “an experience fully God-centered, asking of God no gift more urgently than His presence, the gift of Himself, joyous to the highest degree, and unmistakably real.”⁶²

NOTES

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1. Byron C. Lambert, "Reflections on *Reflections on the Psalms*," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 2, no. 1 (Nov., 1970): 2.
 2. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1958).
 3. *Current History*, Review of *Reflections on the Psalms*, by C. S. Lewis, 36 (March, 1959): 173.
 4. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963).
 5. James M. Houston, "The Prayer Life of C. S. Lewis," in *The Riddle of Joy: G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis*, edited by Michael H. MacDonald and Andrew A. Tadie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 70.
 6. Perry C. Bramlett, "Reflections on the Psalms," in *The C. S. Lewis Reader's Encyclopedia*, edited by Jeffrey Schultz and John G. West, Jr., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 353.
 7. George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (1988; rpt. Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 390.
 8. C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greaves, 1957, in *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914-1963)* (New York: MacMillan, 1979), 545.
 9. Ibid.
 10. Sayer, op. cit., 391.
 11. Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 15-28; cf. Reppert's article "The Lewis-Anscombe Controversy: A Discussion of the Issues," *Christian Scholar's Review* 19, no. 1 (Sept., 1989): 32-48.
 12. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1947).
 13. Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their Friends* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 217.
 14. Sayer, op. cit., 390.
 15. Bramlett, op. cit., 351.
 16. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955).
 17. E.g., Samuel Alexander, *Space, Time and Deity* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1950), Edwyn Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (1938; rpt. Boston: Beacon Hill, 1957), and Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917; rpt. London: Pelican, 1959).

18. C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism* (1933; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958).

19. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 13-17.

20. C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (1953; rpt. New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 179-91.

21. For a good recent treatment of this point see William J. McClain, "C. S. Lewis and the Reflective Christian," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society*, 36, no. 3 (May-June 2006), 1-9, esp. 5-6.

22. See Donald T. Williams, *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 139f., for further discussion of this point.

23. Corbin Scott Carnell, *Bright Shadows of Reality: C. S. Lewis and the Feeling Intellect* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 64. See also Colin Duriez, *A Field Guide to Narnia* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 45, who corrects some of Carnell's dating.

24. Sayer, *op. cit.*, 253; Carpenter, *op. cit.*, 225-7.

25. C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954).

26. C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greaves, 1957, *op. cit.*, 545.

27. Sayer, *op. cit.*, 323.

28. *Ibid.*, 326.

29. Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 282.

30. Lambert, *op. cit.*, 2.

31. See for example the discussion of the "fabulous" elements of the Old Testament in "Answers to Questions on Christianity," 1944; rpt. in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 57-58, or the discussion of Genesis in chapter 5 of *The Problem of Pain* (1940; rpt. New York: MacMillan, 1967).

32. Lewis, *Reflections*, *op. cit.*, 20.

33. *Ibid.*, 21.

34. *Ibid.*, 22.

35. *Ibid.*, 45.

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36. Ibid., 44.
 37. Ibid., 59.
 38. Ibid., 111-112.
 39. Ibid., 129.
 40. C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942) and "The Alliterative Meter," in *Selected Literary Essays*, edited by Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 15-26.
 41. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), and *The Discarded Image: An Introduction of Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).
 42. Lambert, op. cit., 2.
 43. Chad Walsh, *The Literary Legacy of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 224.
 44. Clyde S. Kilby, *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 147.
 45. Lewis, *Reflections*, op. cit., 3.
 46. C. S. Lewis, "Petitionary Prayer: A Problem without an Answer," 1953; in *Christian Reflections*, edited by Walter Hooper, 142-151 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).
 47. Lewis, *Reflections*, op. cit., 22.
 48. Ibid., 67.
 49. Ibid., 2.
 50. C. S. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," 1959; in *Christian Reflections*, edited by Walter Hooper, 152-66 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).
 51. See for example Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, Revised Edition (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), especially 439-43 on the reliability of the Davidic attributions in the psalm titles.
 52. "I do not wish to reduce the skeptical element in your minds. I am only suggesting that it need not be reserved exclusively for the New Testament and the Creeds. Try doubting something else." Lewis, "Modern Theology," op. cit., 164.
 53. Robert Merchant, "Reflections on the Psalms," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 5, no. 3 (January, 1974): 4.
 54. Lewis, *Reflections*, op. cit., 109.

55. Ibid., 111.

56. Ibid., 111-12.

57. Walter Ramshaw, "Reflections on *Reflections on the Psalms*," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 11, no. 11 (Sept., 1980): 5.

58. "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," 1978; quoted from *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus*, edited by J. I. Packer and Thomas Oden (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 50.

59. Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls, *C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer: Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of our Time* (Dowers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 127, bend over too far backwards in saying that Lewis "is not challenging the doctrine of inerrancy" in *Reflections on the Psalms* and the letter to Kilby. For further evaluations of Lewis's approach to inspiration, see Wesley L. Kort, *C. S. Lewis Then and Now* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 200), 24, and Will Vaus, *Mere Theology: A Guide to the Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 32-41.

60. C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," *World Dominion* 22 (September-October 1944): 267-70; rpt. in *God in the Dock: Essays on theology and Ethics*, edited by Walter Hooper, 63-67.

61. Quoted in C. S. Kilby, *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis*, op. cit., 153. For the complete text, see C. S. Lewis to Professor Clyde S. Kilby, 7 May 1959, in *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. with a memoir by W. H. Lewis (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), 286-7.

62. Lewis, *Reflections*, op. cit., 50, 52.

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