

PSALM 146

“Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no help...[...]

Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God...[...]

My Oxford Companion to the Bible (p. 629) reviewing the research suggests that the Book of Psalms was collected over 6 centuries perhaps parts of it canonised in Babylon in the 6th BCE when according to some scholars the Torah was redacted by “R”, the editor of scrolls originally written by “E” (the Elohist), “J” the Jahvist, “P” the priestly writer, and “D” the author of Deuteronomy.

We need to know to whom the Torah, Tanach, Mishnah, Gemara and Midrashim as well as the Psalms address themselves to understand our tradition fully. Ezra, after the return of the educated exiles from Babylon, made public 24 books, although Daniel, the Apocrypha, Maccabees and Esther were added later (*OCttB* p. 100). Perhaps some Psalms were written before and after the Babylonian exile which left the peasant class untouched.

The Mosaic tradition dates back to a revolt and an exodus happening at about the middle of the 13th century BCE although Israelite and Judean settlement survived in what became Palestine before Joshua’s conquest amongst monotheistic-cum-pagan semites who were later called Israelites in the north and Judeans in the south.

According to some archaeologists these Jewish Palestinians were not all enslaved or deported and were to all intents and purposes our spiritual and even genetic ancestors. No doubt as farming peasants they were exploited by an aristocracy of landowners, bailiffs and tax-collectors.

The prophets continuously addressed issues of poverty and oppression by the rich of the poor. The Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek and Roman hegemonic empires would want Palestinian Jews to stay on the land and cultivate it so that there be law, order and taxes. But no revolution in favour of a local religious revolt. Scholars suggest that the destruction of the second Temple under Titus was not official imperial Roman policy but an act of gratuitous vandalism committed by stressed soldiers out of control. Hence put not your trust in either princes or the sons of men. This attack on Israel and Judea had happened frequently producing an exquisite sense of social and ethical justice and injustice. But why the Hebrew Bible, with the Christian Bible the most read books of all time - at least in the West and much of the Middle East and globally perhaps?

20th century post-modernist critical theory, influenced by structuralist anthropology looks at works as things in themselves with a latent meaning emerging from the philosophical whole of a culture which remembers its history. The great contribution of Jewish (Judean) and Israelite culture to civilisation (the art of living in cities) is that it valorised what the ancient Greeks dramatised- the presence not just of moira - Fate - but the possibility of transcending Fate and implementing what to some in the West is Platonic and Aristotelian science and rational wisdom through ethical understanding in everyday action including meditation and what happens in the synagogue community - prayer, music, the recollection of a mythical and a real history and mitzvot.

The psalms were meant to be sung in the Temple or Tabernacle or perhaps even at a pre-Mosaic altar and definitely found their place in a post-Temple synagogue. What exactly is the God of Jacob? What is the LORD? What is God?

God is Elohim which literally in Hebrew means “gods” but when referred to in the singular means the One invisible, omnipotent God. To some post-Holocaust Jews, God broke the covenant with Israel/Judea. Why? Some post-Holocaust Jewish religion abandons theology for ethical atheism, which is “embodied” in the Ayn Sof of Kabbalism, the Without-End of the universe. We are subject to the political (“princes”) but Jacob’s God is associated with a hoped for LORD which in Greek and Kabbalistic wisdom is ultimately the laws of nature made ethical by Ayn Sof, by literally Nothing but Nature filling the cosmos on which we as intermediaries of Nature act - hopefully and ethically.