

Sunday 12th June 2016

Nik Howarth's contribution to the Psalm Study

Selah!

Please get a Bible and look at Psalm 3.

Does it start with:

“A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.”

If not, find another translation (such as ESV or NKJV).

Now look at the start of the Psalms from 3 onwards for a bit.

Notice how many of them have headings.

And what about the little word “Selah” after verse 2 in Psalm 3. What’s that all about? Notice it comes up many times in the Psalms and a few times in Habakkuk. Some things are self-explanatory, like the heading of Psalm 3, it is a context. Others contain technical terms like “Miktam”.

What does all this mean?

There is a simple and easy answer to that question.

..... Nobody knows!

These phrases and headings are in the Septuagint, which is the Greek bible that Jesus used, and they had lost the meanings then!

Sometime between the writing of the Psalms and Jesus time the meaning was lost.

What can we learn from that?

Firstly:

God put some things in the Bible you cannot understand. Think about that; God meant to, it is not an accident. It does not mean that the things that you can understand, like salvation and faith, are not trustworthy, because, you can understand those. It does indicate that God is saying you cannot understand everything in the Bible.

Secondly:

Some of the headings are easy to understand, they are context, placing the psalm in time and space. What is God saying? He is saying that sometimes context is important. Sometimes it is not. In other words, you need to think a bit.

Thirdly:

Some of the technical words, like “Selah” and “Miktam” (there are others!) are widely believed to be either musical or liturgical instructions. I like that as it means that music is in the Bible! This gives, to my way of thinking, a special place to music, and also to liturgical order.

Why is this important? Any musician can tell you that; if you don't have musical order you have chaos and not beauty. (And, may I assure you, that also includes traditions like free jazz ...there is order and rules below it all). In short, these phrases are God commanding order and structure so that the rendition is beautiful. God loves beauty.

Exodus 28:2

And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty.

But read on a bit:

Exodus 28:3

You shall speak to all the skilful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him for my priesthood.

You can follow that thought in other references to the building of the tabernacle and you will find that the creating of beauty is a Holy Spirit given gift.

In other words, the Holy Spirit can anoint hands and actions, as well as words and thoughts. If you gift is a hand and action gift, it is no less than one that is mind and words.

But beauty is also internal

1 Peter 3:4

But let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.

In summary

Not everything in the Bible is obvious. Translations can make a big difference to our understanding (many leave these bits out!).

But with God nothing is an accident, these parts are there for a purpose. To me they help me understand how I should approach the Bible, they cause me to humbly accept that I cannot understand it all, they point to God's desire for worship and music, to his structuring beauty around skill and order, that skill when submitted to God can be as anointed as preaching or teaching, that harmony comes with mutuality and co-operation (hence the need for clear commands), ---that, to me, the Bible is more beautify now than when I first read it.