

[1 Wings to Protect]

There is something rather attractive about speaking from the Psalms to a St David's conference. What is not so nice for me, is that I am no OT scholar at all, although I have been a life long absorber of scripture and I happily live under the wings of the 1st feature of the 1888 Lambeth Quadrilateral: 'The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as "containing all things necessary to salvation," and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.' Scripture has continued to sustain and disturb my life in equal measure. As G.K. Chesterton put it: 'When a man reads the Bible he is not merely reading a book ... he is being dealt with by God.'

It seemed good to explore the use of the word 'wings' as applied, through images, to God in various passages. After some sifting of data I already knew and discovering things I most certainly did not, the first study I am calling; 'Wings to Protect.'

The Psalms use the idea of wings in two related ways.

A] Protection and refuge

The wings of God are described as a place of safety against pressure, opposition, difficulty or disaster. For example Psalm 17: 8 'hide me in the shadow of your wings', Psalm 57:2, 'I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings', or Pss 91:4 'under his wings you will find refuge.'

William Brown in *Seeing the Psalms*¹ argues that this word 'Refuge' is one of two images and iconic metaphors that are constitutive of the Psalms as a whole, with the other metaphor being 'pathway'. So he praises a fellow author F.D. Creach who has suggested that the refuge motif is a 'root metaphor' so frequent that the Psalms as a whole are 'encouraging readers to seek refuge in Yahweh.' In the political context of settled but smallish country, set between great powers south and north, this makes sense. In the spiritual context of competition from persuasive Canaanite agricultural religion, it is telling. This is an invitation to trust that applies to all generations of God's people. Brown spots the 'refuge' image as early as the end of Pss 2; 'how fortunate are all who take refuge in him.' He thinks other related metaphors are built upon it. A worked example is Pss 18. It adds crag, stronghold, rock, as well as shield, horn, secure height. In characteristic Hebrew style, the word 'refuge' is given as the 4th metaphor symbolically placed at the middle of all the 7 terms. It is, one might say, the key stone in the 7 word arch.

Why should wings give protection?

Responses vary. Brown draws parallels to Egyptian iconography in which a wide range of deities –who were not all customarily drawn as birds – are shown thus protecting monarchs. In the Pss this is sometimes true of a prospective monarch, David in threats from Saul, Pss 57:1. Cragie, in an evangelical commentary dislikes the suggested Egyptian connection and prefers the association to the wings of the Seraphim above the Ark of the Covenant. It is true that the refuge metaphor is linked to the Tabernacle in Pss 27:5 'he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle.' A third explanation is that it may simply be a picture drawn from nature, in which often, though not always, the wings are seen as those of the hen covering chicks. I say not always for considerable power is hinted at in Pss 91, where the wings are those of the raptor.

In the end it is not so important to choose rightly between these sources, as to come under the wings ourselves. In this connection one singular New Testament reference to wings are the disturbing words of Jesus, likening himself to the Hen, longing to gather his reluctant or

¹ W. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms* (Westminster John Knox Press 2002) p. 16f.

stubborn people under his wings, but they are unwilling.² The recording of this surely serves as a warning to subsequent generations that protection is not automatic; sometimes it is a matter of responding to God's initiative to protect us and at other times of seeking it.

The image of placing ourselves under the wings, or in their shadow, is one in which both proximity and willingness are vital. So Pss 17:7 speaks of us 'taking refuge', Pss 63:8 'I stay close to you' and earlier 63:1 uses verbs like 'seek', and 'thirst'. Steven Croft when a theological college principal always used to remind his students of a salutary survey which revealed that while clergy spent many hours in administration, the average time spent in daily personal prayer was only two minutes. One of the features I appreciate in the offices of Northumbria Community is that they speak often about seeking God. They show me what I aspire to, but do not condemn me in my feebleness of seeking.

I began this examination in Pss 17 – which has as the line before wings, 'keep me as the apple of your eye.' Rogerson explains the apple means: 'the pupil, here a symbol of that which is the most precious and to be guarded with the greatest care. The same notion of intimacy and tenderness is contained in the phrase 'the shadow of thy wings' which likens God to a mother bird sheltering her young.'³ Others comment that if you look closely at another's eye pupil you can see a tiny reflection of yourself. So a lover may see themselves literally in the other's eyes. Intimacy with God can frighten Anglicans, but the scriptures and the saints like Francis reassure us it is normal. Kidner, commenting on Pss 61:1-4 notes there is a progression of images toward the intimate & personal; rock, tower, tent, wings.⁴

It is a good reminder that God's desire to protect springs not just from his kindness or power but also out of our value to him. This seems connected to the previous verse, Pss 17:7, 'show the wonder of your great love.' My experience in ministry is that some people are very confident of this intimate love and others always struggle to believe it. Finding the key that unlocks the difficulty for the latter does not seem easy.

But does this protection always work?

Knight in his commentary writes 'the believer must not fall into trap of being an optimist; nor dare he be a pessimist.' He advocates being a realist. I don't know how far that takes us. Who knows what realism is, ahead of time? I suspect God is more interested that we grow in the Christian virtue of hope than that we get all we desire. Hope is less about outcomes for us and more about trust in God, knowing intimacy with God despite outcomes. It is clear in Pss 17, that the wings do not remove the presence of opposition. However it ends v 15 with the Psalmist awaking and seeing God's likeness. Presumably this is not about seeing the literal form, but rather a way of describing an intensity of encounter with God. We find the same in Job 42:5 'my eyes have now seen you' and Matt 5:8 'blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.'

John Goldingay was my OT tutor. He married Ann who was diagnosed, during their engagement, with MS. His life has contained much pain and many questions. I read you his words about once being enfolded by the wings of God.⁵

All this connects to the 2nd set of connections related to being under the wings of God. If the 1st is protection,

² Matt 23:37 and Luke 13:34.

³ Rogerson, Cambridge Bible Commentary on Pss 17.8

⁴ D. Kidner, The Psalms, p. 219.

⁵ Goldingay, *To The Usual Suspects*, p 63.

B] The wings of the provider

A clear example is Pss 36:5-9 but also Pss 63:2-8, with the 1st being a fuller account.

In Pss 36, the love of God is widened from personal to universal proportions. It reaches to heaven and depths, preserves all creatures, and does not distinguish between high and low beings. 'All take refuge in the shadow of your wings', v 8. The provision is more than defensive protection it is also positive provision, it continues: 'They feast on the abundance of your house, and drink from your river of delights.' Several commentators see an Eden reference here.⁶ The following imagery in v 9 of a 'fountain of life' is different from a Genesis tree of life – though both are words about sources.

The source of the life and the feast is God's faithful or loyal-love *hesed*: the love that is better than life, Pss 63:3. I find it fascinating and helpful that while the Psalmist exults in God's love, describing it in Pss 36:7 as priceless and unfailing, yet by v.10 comes the prayer 'Continue your love'. One minute we are standing secure and confident, the next we are back on our heels or maybe better, on our knees.

[A problem and a discovery]

I suspect in the western church as we contemplate the future in the 21st century our sense of God's provision and even protection is becoming stretched. While we may have individual stories, how does that fit with a 20th century of ecological rape of the earth, wars around the world, as well as world wars, and singular, unremitting church decline, punctuated by unedifying church scandals and loss of credibility.

Here I find Brown helpful again, though perhaps not as he expected. He notes that in the time of the united Kings, God's presence was focussed on Jerusalem, which in turn became seen as God's nest, with Israel as her brood. Hence in Pss 84, the swallow and sparrow nest there. This locating of where the wings were, becomes even more focussed upon the Jerusalem temple in Pss 27:4-5.

It seems to me this illustrates that once the OT people of God were settled and gained a capital, protection of what they had became the dominant request. Then the faithfulness of God can be subverted into expectation that God the mother hen will protect, maintain and provide for the continuing of what is already established. Before the Exodus that was unbelievable, up till the Exile it looked plausible, but after then it changed again.

Here is my suggested link and contrast between the two days studies:

The wings of the Hen protect and provide. These images are dominant to when the people of God are settled and secure.

But the wings of the Eagle carry and indeed even enable others to fly. These images are dominant in the Exodus and the Exile, when the people of God need rescue and transformation. I wonder which is more pertinent today.

Group questions

What is your experience of God's protection?

Discuss whether you find the themes of protection and provision helpful or problematic.

How do you react to the thought that he thinks of you as 'the apple of his eye'?

What have you found helps people accept they are loved by God?

⁶ Knight's Commentary on the Psalms p.175 and Eaton's p. 161.