



# Seeking God Wholeheartedly

In an ecological reading of Psalm 63 VERONICA LAWSON reflects on how all living creatures yearn for the bounty of God.

## Psalm 63

- 1 O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul (*nephesh*) thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
- 2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.
- 3 Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.
- 4 So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
- 5 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
- 6 when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
- 7 for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

the lyrics have survived.

The eight verses of the responsorial psalm for the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time are taken from Psalm 63, which combines elements of lament and praise. The three verses not included in the selection (verses 9-11) identify the speaker as a king who praises God as his protector on the one hand and, on the other, identifies God as the agent of vengeance on those who seek to destroy him. While these verses fall outside the scope of this reflection, we can critique the inference that the suffering of evildoers is a function of God's retribution. We might bring these verses into dialogue with other passages from the Book of Psalms that present a different attitude to suffering. In Psalm 65:3, for instance, the psalmist is overwhelmed by personal "deeds of iniquity" and is aware of God's forgiveness.

An ecological reading of the verses that comprise our responsorial psalm

More often than not in our Sunday liturgies, a contemporary hymn replaces the responsorial psalm after the first reading with the result that we are becoming less and less familiar with a deeply significant part of our Jewish-Christian tradition. The Book

of Psalms has been called a "school of prayer" or a "book of praises". While prayer and praise are key features of this collection of 150 songs or poems, there are other genres represented such as meditations on the Law and celebrations of the Jerusalem Temple. Sadly the music is lost. Fortunately,

seeks to explore the diverse elements and the network of relationships in the text. First there is God who is addressed in Genesis as *Elohim*, the name for God as Creator of the heavens and the earth, of the entire cosmos and of all that is. The title *Elohim* is plural in form but singular in meaning, with an emphasis on might and power. And yet, God is presented here in personal terms, “my” *Elohim*, and as source of life-saving sustenance for the speaker.

***There is nothing abstract about the representation of the Holy One of Israel in this psalm. God is grounded in relationship with God’s created world: God’s power and glory reside in compassionate response to hunger and thirst.***

While God is said to dwell in the sanctuary made by human hands, the sub-text or inter-text of the opening verse is the biblical image of God transcending human constructed space and providing water to slake the thirst of all that inhabit the wilderness. Steadfast love (*hesed*) or loving kindness that is more precious than life is predicated of God. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, God’s *hesed* is frequently linked with God’s fidelity. In Greek translation, it comes to denote the mercy (*eleos*) of God. God has wings in this psalm: is this a reference to the winged cherubim who overshadowed the mercy-seat or seat for Israel’s God on the Ark of the Covenant, or is it depicting God as a protective mother bird sheltering her young beneath her wings? It may be both.

There is nothing abstract about the representation of the Holy One of Israel in this psalm. God is grounded in relationship with God’s created world: God’s power and glory reside in compassionate response to hunger and thirst. The ecologically sensitive reader, attentive to the hunger and thirst of the parched and weary land

that serves as a metaphor for human thirst for God, brings to the surface the pain of Earth in our time of climate crisis, the pollution of streams from mining, the devastating bush fires that destroy life in its multiple forms and the thirst of so many other-than-human species.

The analogy of the “rich feast” in verse 5 evokes the banquet of fine food and wine of Isaiah 25:6-9. An ecological perspective alerts the reader to the anthropocentrism or human-centredness of the Isaian text, where the banquet is for all “peoples”, and of its engagement in this context where God satisfies the spiritual hunger of Israel’s monarch “as with a rich feast”.

Israel’s ruler “seeks” (*saḥar*) God with his whole being. There is an intensity in the Hebrew verb *saḥar* that is not communicated in the English translation “to seek”. When the speaker declares: “My soul (*nephesh*) thirsts for you; my flesh (*basar*) yearns/faints for you”, the parallelism of the Hebrew poetry suggests equivalence between these two key concepts. In other words, both *nephesh* and *basar* have reference to the speaker’s whole being. This verse evokes the creation of humankind in Genesis 2:8 where YHWH *Elohim* forms the human (*ha-adam*) from the humus (*ha-adamah*) and breathes the breath of life into the nostrils of *ha-adam* so that *ha-adam* becomes a living *nephesh*. In Genesis 2:19, every animal of the field and every bird of the air will be designated a living *nephesh*.

As we make the words of the psalmist our own, we might gather into our prayer all the living creatures of Earth that yearn for the sustenance that derives from the bounty of the creator God, who is the help of all that lives, and in the shadow of whose wings all creatures sing for joy. ♡

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## Merchant, Miner, Mandarin: The Life and Times of the Remarkable Choie Sew Hoy

by Jenny Sew Hoy Agnew and Trevor Gordon Agnew

Published by Canterbury University Press, 2020

Reviewed by Gerald Scanlan

BOOK

Jenny Sew Hoy Agnew and Trevor Agnew have undertaken a prodigious feat of research to present their insightful and unexpectedly relevant portrait of a truly remarkable pioneer.

While the Sew Hoy name and family are well-known in the deep south, how that came to be makes fascinating and at times disturbing reading. Jenny and Trevor draw on extensive historical records, cultural insight and family wisdom to situate Choie Sew Hoy within both Chinese and colonial British cultures and to illustrate his deft navigation between them.

In their hands, Choie Sew Hoy’s story becomes a lens on the turbulent latter decades of the 19th century, featuring the goldrush, Dunedin’s economic transformation, regional and national politics, the casual racism and outbursts of violence that Chinese immigrants experienced, the emergence of business and social elites, the boom and bust colonial economy and the striking impact of innovation and technological progress.

Choie Sew Hoy emerges from this account as undoubtedly remarkable: astute, generous, determined, gracious, courageous, bold and far-sighted. His life and story offer a compelling testament to the merits of immigration, cultural diversity and racial tolerance. It is a story about our past but also our future – a biography with a prophetic voice. ♡

