

PSALMS 1–50

Sighs and Songs of Israel

E L L E N T. C H A R R Y

Foreword by William P. Brown



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Dedicated to the Poets of Israel

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SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that Scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that Scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.¹

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia* (trans. Joseph W. Trigg; London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of Scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”² Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of Scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon” the words of Scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of Scripture is encumbered in our own day.”³ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”⁴ We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks interpretive

2. *Against Heresies* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. *Ibid.*, 340.

frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of Scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”⁵ In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read Scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.⁶ To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”⁷ The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of Scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of Scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapide, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of Scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian

5. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (ed. E. Theodore Bachmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

Scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of Scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars whom we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jer. 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”⁸ This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of Scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of

8. *Sermon* 212.2.

historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of Scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with Scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of Scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore, in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as Scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest

fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of Scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of Scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

FOREWORD

Ellen Charry's commentary on Psalms is like no other. While form criticism has been, and continues to be, a staple of scholarly research, Charry's interest in the Psalter has more to do with what I would call "life criticism," but not in any piously anachronistic sense. Ancient Israel's travails and reforms are in full view throughout her discussion. Yet the *Sitze im Leben* of the psalms ultimately prove their value beyond their historical roots or formal settings. For Charry, the psalms are theologically and pastorally instructive for readers across generations, and she mines their edifying value for all they're worth. Her keen interest in ethics and historical theology, matched by her command of the Hebrew language and Jewish tradition, have equipped her well for engaging these highly charged texts of poetry. Drawing from a rich variety of patristic, rabbinic, and medieval interpretations, as well as from modern Psalms scholarship, Charry has produced a theologically robust, morally nuanced, honest-to-God kind of commentary. Whether the reader will agree with her at every interpretive move is beside the point.

The hermeneutical journey of commentary writing, particularly on Psalms, is invariably transformative. As she herself admits, Charry has discovered how central the issue of theodicy is in the Psalter, anticipated already in Ps. 1. Pain suffuses the book of Psalms, so much so that one could subtitle the Psalter "Pain Seeking Understanding." In Charry's words, "searing pain must be honored before it can be stilled." The psalmic attempt to "honor" the pain, to articulate it and understand it, even while raging against it, is consistently theological. While pain can rob us of speech, the psalmists of old were able to found a bulwark against silence-inducing pain, for they dared to give unfettered, honest voice to pain before God and community. Their doing so in the unsettling language of complaint, however, strikes many modern readers as audacious, even shameless. So be it. Charry has found a way to honor the psalmists' audacity, ambiguous as it may be, and turn it into hope.

As Charry observes regarding Ps. 16, the psalms teach us to “think and behave theologically when *in extremis*.” All the psalms, from laments to hymns of praise, are theologically edifying. They are meant for our good, Charry would say. Still underappreciated by many readers, the psalms were written and compiled *to be used*. They were written *for* others in various situations and contexts. They were designed to be “user friendly.” Hence, the language employed in the psalms is open and instructive, as Charry demonstrates throughout her commentary. It seems only appropriate, then, that she concludes her discussion of each psalm with a reflection on its “theological pedagogy” (*not* “application”—a far too mechanical, superficial term). It is here that she deftly navigates between the ancient context of a given psalm and its instructive value for contemporary readers.

According to Charry, the psalms are fundamentally about faithfulness, about tenaciously holding on to faith in the one true God amid the temptations of despair and idolatry. As she aptly states, the poets of ancient Israel “know how difficult faithfulness can be,” and their task was to make faithfulness “durable” for their audience and for future generations. It is in such faithfulness that Israel saw itself unwaveringly in relationship with God, even amid felt abandonment. The Psalms model demonstrates for readers, in whatever season of life, whether in crisis or in contentment, how to be faithful, empowered servants of the living God. That is Charry’s fundamental conviction about the Psalter, a conviction that she elaborates with pedagogical vigor and a pastoral heart, a heart that has been broken and yet continues to find resolve in the struggle of living faithfully *coram Deo*. She is in good company with the psalmists.

William P. Brown

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INTRODUCTION

When I told an acquaintance that I was commenting on the psalms, he deftly probed, “What do you have to say about the psalms that has not already been said?” Truly, the Psalter may be the most commented upon text in human history precisely because these haunting poems provoke, shock, and soothe by turns, latching onto readers and resonating with the sufferings and strivings of each one afresh. Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296–373), the great formulator of Nicene theology, tersely annotated the psalms, claiming that each one holds up a mirror to the soul.¹ While in truth not all psalms offer comfort to relieve suffering, the fact that they contend with grief, humiliation, and God-abandonment is, in its own way, a refreshing type of companionship. They offer a ministry of understanding.

Wise authorities enshrined Israel’s sighs and songs in Jewish and Christian worship, and later readers have countlessly copied and reprinted them in pocket versions for private meditation on the road and *in extremis*. The mishnaic tractate *Pirke Avot* (5:22A)² attributes the following to one of its sages: “Turn [scripture] over and over for everything is in it. Look into it, grow old and worn in it, and never move away from it, for you will find no better portion than it.” Perhaps the observation applies, above all, to the Psalter.

When asked which book of the Bible I wanted to comment on, I immediately blurted out “Psalms.” It has been the most liberating academic work I have ever undertaken, as I entered the tersely inflected elegance of the Hebrew poetry that often challenges translation. I rejoice in this opportunity to speak the theology and psychology of the poets into life once more. Even if my probing merely concatenates the insights of previous commentators, I fear no shame, for I dwell in the finest company.

1. Athanasius 1980, 101–47.

2. Neusner 1988, 689.

Despite the beauty of the language there are reasons to be shy of the psalms. Many countenance attitudes and policies of empire, conquest, revenge, and violence are deeply disturbing to modern sensibilities when read as scripture, even when one recalls that most of the poems are not proposed as from God but to or about God. These are not values that one necessarily wants to inculcate in one's children. While many commentators undermine the plain meaning of the texts by reading symbolically, I face the text as it is in order to live into the psychological honesty of the poets struggling with the challenge of religion and empire that is still alive in some parts of the world.

Perhaps one reason for the enduring power of the Psalter, despite its troubling aspects, is its blistering honesty; not only does the Psalter not shrink from owning negative emotions, but it also does not underplay the experience of abandonment by God voiced in the laments that dominate the first third of the Psalter. It is precisely this experience of abandonment, also placed in the mouth of Jesus as he died, that discomfits later theologians who have consistently sought to tidy up psalmic theology to protect a presupposed view of God as present, gracious, and powerful. Ironically, admitting that one does not always experience God this way vitalizes these poems. They showcase people struggling to make sense of God in the face of deep doubts and sometimes frankly failing in that endeavor. That the canonizers included this “counter testimony”³ in the canon attests to their refusal to whitewash the problem of theodicy. The poets address people where they are, even when doing so flies in the face of authorized theological expectation.

Discovering the theodicy question at the heart of the Psalter was perhaps the greatest new learning for me in doing this work. In my reading here, theodicy accounts for Israel's great struggle against idolatry or “wickedness” within Israel as the poets urge loyalty to the ancestral faith even when cries for rescue from scoffers seem to be met with divine silence.

In keeping with the psalmists' refusal to avoid hard theological questions about the power and goodness of God—which they hold to overall—I do not shy away from the problem of theodicy as central to the first third of the Psalter. I honor the gift that the lament psalms in particular offer to those who suffer by honoring their worst fears. This desire to support the poets' honesty led me not only to face the theodicy issue but also to resist the temptation to anachronize the psalms by christologizing them in the manner of so much Christian interpretation. I do not interpret through a Nicene screen that relocates the Psalter in a Christian framework; these poems speak their own theological convictions and are honored for their integrity, contrary as that may sometimes be to later theological presuppositions.

How then, one may ask, can the psalms be read Christianly if one does not christologize them? We may read the poems in their own theological integrity and also engage with them through later Christian images, texts, and criteria, not in order to domesticate them but so that the soul-piercing questions that the poets

3. Brueggemann 1997.

raise in lament, supplication, and imprecation may expand Christian piety beyond conventional answers. Stilling the pain of abandonment and humiliation with a christological interpretation may comfort, but it can also belittle the pain that leaves people agape at the thought that there may be no justice in which to rest. The psalmists are convinced that such searing pain must be honored before it can be stilled.

While some theologians may disprefer theological ambiguity, people in anguish need the respectful space that Israel's poets permit readers in order to confront the deep fear that perhaps God is not "there" after all—or worse, that God is, finally, the enemy behind the enemy. The psalms entertain fear and doubt about God along with the incorrigible belief in the eventual triumph of good over evil. I rely on both Jewish and Christian commentators who, over many centuries, have worked to dispel the darkness of God that "shines" through these poems.

Tasks of Theological Commentary

Historically speaking, the primary task of commenting on sacred texts has been to render them spiritually and morally accessible to later audiences who are culturally and temporally removed from the original setting, circumstances, and perhaps values that gave rise to them. Prior to modernity, theological interpretation was indistinguishable from spiritual interpretation. In different climes, readers must be turned convincingly toward their sacred texts in order both to uphold the moral and theological continuity of the later community's values and norms and to nurture faith. Commentary sought to bridge gaps that time had bored into understanding in order to enable later readers to embrace the sacrality of their revered texts for their own well-being, especially when texts were asynchronous with later values. Classically speaking, theological interpretation is acutely warranted when the revered texts make claims about God and the things of God that, on the face of it, no longer readily compel assent. This is especially the case with the psalms, although no less true of other parts of scripture that lead to various forms of symbolic or figural reading.

Here are three examples:

1. The vast cultural chasm between the Song of Songs and the sexual anxieties of Origen's day led him (and others following him) to embrace allegorical interpretation so that the eroticism of the poems could be sublimated to the desire of devout souls for God.⁴
2. With less urgency, the Noah story, in which humanity is saved from drowning in a wooden vessel floating atop a flood, is interpreted by Justin the Martyr as a type of the true meaning of salvation—that is, through the wood of the cross of Christ and the water that flowed from his pierced side.⁵

4. Origen 1957.

5. Lampe 1969, 167.

3. Psalm 137:9 seeks revenge against the Babylonians for their treatment of Israel. Augustine cannot countenance revenge of one people against another as an appropriate Christian posture, and so “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (NRSV) becomes joy at having dashed one’s bad habits against the rock of Christ: “When evil desire is born, before your bad habits reinforce it, while it is still in its infancy and has not yet fortified itself by alliance with depraved custom, dash it to pieces. It is only a baby still. But make sure it does not survive your violent treatment: dash it on the rock. *And the rock is Christ* [1 Cor. 10:4].”⁶

The desire to harmonize the text with later moral, spiritual, psychological, or theological sensibilities gave rise to figural readings that sought to close moral and cultural gaps between the text and later sensitivities. While all interpretation addresses its current readers, the downside of strategies that moot troubling texts is that the text loses its own voice on the assumption that this distance from later readers is unhelpful or even harmful. Yet recognizing our distance from the text may be edifying when it gives us a fresh perspective on our own time and place. In “cleaning up” the text it loses its repugnancy, but that makes later readers dependent on experts. In the case of allegory, this results in terms quite alien to the text itself. This presents a different sort of alienation from the text than the perceived offensiveness of the text itself, but no less an alienation.

Modern biblical studies, guided by Protestant desire to put the Bible in the hands of the people, undid the eisegetical strategies of figural reading, that the text might speak its own word. Yet those who pray may benefit from being both confronted by the text and lured by it so that it may penetrate the soul in more than one way. My comments seek to uncover the theology of the text on its own terms as well as in terms of my conviction about the theological foundation of the Psalter (explained below). I also try to tease out its psychological and spiritual helpfulness in our own time, often stopping in between to appreciate interpretive insights from other commentators both ancient and modern, including the texts used in the Younger Testament. Each comment is structured by its canonical context and themes, its structure and dynamics, and finally its theological pedagogy from which I try to wrest a gift from the psalmist to us.

Theological Foundation

The interpretation undertaken herein does not make a sustained argument about psalmic theology, but it does work from a conviction about the theological foundation of the first fifty psalms. The basic theological conviction that surfaces

6. Augustine 2004, 240.

throughout the poems, as well as in later Judaism and Christianity, is that the God of Israel is the only true God, the God of the world (Pss. 47, 67). This is the God whom Christians and Muslims worship. The “teeth” in that conviction is that one must make that claim central to one’s identity and way of life. An urgency about the psalms arises from this duplex claim because it triangulates God, Israel, and the gentiles.

Psalms 1 and 2 sound this two-pronged theological conviction about the mission of Israel in the world. Psalm 1, although not specifying the Israelites, exhorts Israelite/Jewish readers to cling to the teachings of God and abjure the wickedness of those who scorn God’s way. Psalm 2 goes in a quite different direction, identifying Israel’s king as God’s anointed regent who is divinely authorized to threaten and intimidate the foreign nations surrounding Israel into submission to Israel’s God (to “kiss his feet” [Ps. 2:12 NRSV]). Israel’s king is divinely appointed to impose God on the nations until they “take refuge in him,” as Israel also must.

Both of these leading psalms bear progeny throughout the work. Psalm 1’s division of people into the faithful and the wicked surfaces within the first third of the Psalter, in Pss. 3, 7, 11, 15, 17, 34, and 36. Psalm 2’s insistence on the universal scope of God’s intentions for humanity through Israel plays out in Pss. 18, 21, 29, 33, and 45–48. Yet these two themes are not as differently-pointed as they may at first appear. For if the God of Israel is indeed God of the world, a theologian-poet will understandably train one eye on the “home team” and the other on God’s further target audience. If, as I propose, the ultimate theological goal of the Psalter is to advance the universal recognition of God, Israel’s faithfulness is the key witness to God’s presence, grace, and power abroad.

My read of the theology of the Psalter, and of the Tanakh more broadly, is that Israel is to model faithfulness to God not only for the sake of its own well-being but also to the end that God’s universal reign may be acknowledged among the nations. The Psalter unpacks this duplex mission in the world one poem at a time. While the two themes interact in many of the poems, here I discuss them individually.

It is easy to read many if not most of the psalms as an elaboration of the basic commandment of Deut. 6:4, that Israel is to love the Lord with all its heart, soul, and strength. God has chosen Israel for himself, and the integrity of its life depends upon its loyalty to that election. This is the heart of the exhortation of Ps. 1 that clearly divides people into two stark categories. If Israel is unfaithful to its identity as God’s own, it has no credibility offering God to the nations, and God is not pleased.

I read the individual laments that dominate the first third of the Psalter through the lens of Ps. 1. These anguished cries denounce “the wicked,” depicted as disloyal to God’s way. Although the suffering is personal and interpersonal, it is theologically freighted. The complainants often beg for release from suffering, for it would demonstrate to the scoffers within Israel as well as to the nations that God is present, gracious, and powerful. While there are compelling proposals about precisely

who “the enemies” are in the lament psalms,⁷ one possibility is that the speakers and their foes battle over whether God truly is present, gracious, and powerful. The poignancy of the debate lies in the fact that God’s delay in rescuing the suppliant supports the opponents’ case that perhaps God is not “there.” The complainant struggles desperately to remain steadfast in the face of debilitating evidence of God’s absence (e.g., Pss. 4, 6, 13, 35, 62, 74, 79, 80, 82, 89, 90, 119:81–88). An important psychological side effect of the theodicy struggle in the laments is the experience of being scorned for one’s faithfulness against empirical evidence. The complainant is oppressed precisely because he trusts God, and others ridicule him for it. That is, the *Atheismusstreit* (the atheistic threat) here involves mocking and scorning the faithful who experience such contempt as shame. It is the shame of disgrace, not of guilt.

At the same time, Israel’s own claim that there is no god but God, creator of heaven and earth, presses its theologian-poets to turn the community back to God in order to look outward to the international scope of God’s reach. Although internally divided between religious and skeptical Israelites/Jews, the nation as a whole is to bring the nations to acknowledge God alongside Israel. Israel bears a burdensome election; it must itself remain faithful (always a challenge, as Ps. 78 lays bare) in order to bring God to outsiders—a delicate task to be sure, as Ruth and Jonah make plain. These theologian-poets work both sides of this twisted street.

The Tanakh does not address whether gentiles who acknowledge Israel’s God—like Pharaoh, the widow of Zarephath, and the general Naaman, along with Ruth and the Ninevites—are expected to worship God as the one and only God. Rather, the burning question is the flip side of that coin: whether the Israelites are succumbing to idolatry. Idolatry is truly Israel’s worst enemy. The Canaanites are infiltrating Israel’s tribes—the opposite of what should be happening. Israel should be exporting God rather than being seduced by alien gods who pollute its accountability before God. The theological bottom line of the Psalter is that there is only one God, the God of Israel. The tension inherent in that basic assumption pops up throughout the Tanakh and pulses through the Psalter, which struggles with tribalism and imperialism in light of its conviction of divine universality.

Some psalms reduce Israel’s situation vis-à-vis the nations to the speakers’ enemies, and Pss. 2, 79, and 110 beseech God’s wrath on them for the deliverance of Israel; several are clear that these nations are to know and glorify Israel’s God and be judged by him (Pss. 2:10–11; 22:27–28; 57:9; 67:2–5; 80:8; 86:9; 96:3–10; 98:2, 9; 102:15; 108:3; 117:1; 126:2). Israel has a conflicted and ambivalent relationship with its neighbors in a political climate in which imperial power connotes dignity and honor. On one hand, Israel longs for its enemies to come to know the power of God through their military defeat by Israel’s warriors. On the other hand, Israel is called to extend the reach of God’s reign to

7. Fløysvik 1997; Miller 1983; Steussy 2008.

its enemies by demonstrating righteousness for them. Various psalms entertain alternate strategies for fulfilling this complex mandate.

In proposing that the Psalter promotes the notion that the God of Israel is the Lord of the universe, I link its urgent initial exhortation to piety within Israel to its mission to bring gentiles to God. While this linkage may seem odd at first because it forces Israel to face in two directions simultaneously, it is precisely this tension that makes the psalms so alluring. In truth, the employment of intimidation and military conquest, as well as the entreaty for God to destroy Israel's enemies (who appear in Ps. 2), might not advance Israel's call to bring gentiles to God. Elijah (1 Kgs. 17) and Elisha (2 Kgs. 5) employ a gentler approach. They heal gentiles rather than threaten them with harm. Offering help would commend a kind God to Israel's gentile neighbors rather than presenting God as one who brings destruction upon those he expects to honor him. The harsh approach taken by some psalms may not be appealing, but neither is it unusual. Christians have forced Christ on non-Christians, and Islam reached the pinnacle of its strength through military conquest in the name of God, although Muslims permitted conquered Jews and Christians to retain their ancestral faith notwithstanding civic disabilities.

The various expressions of these theological currents in the Psalter make Israel's triangulation between God and the nations particularly interesting. To get at some of these dynamics I have parsed the several conversations happening both within individual poems as well as those happening between the poet and the implied readers—sometimes this involves his immediate audience and sometimes the much later audience of today.

The poets operate on several levels at once. In a single psalm the speaker, the narrator, and God may all be conversing with one another, each offering his perspective to the others. Further, the poet's consciousness of the audience is evident as he overhears the conversation among the various characters in the poem. Changes of speaker, person, and addressee express not only the several conversations taking place in the poems but also the emotional tensions at work in them. My comments try to articulate the interest of each of these voices to discern the import of the conversation around the issue at stake. In doing so, the different perspectives of the various characters within the poems call all to be faithful to God in order to offer God to the world.

In this commentary, I try to discern the theology of the texts and ask how Israelite theology relates to or challenges later Christian theology and piety. To that end, I tend to the various voices in the psalms—the changes of speaker and of addressee in dialogues and monologues meant to be overheard by the worshiping community as well as foreign nations. My comments do not arise from following a particular scholarly school or discussion in an effort to contribute to it.

Still, a small conversation takes place concerning the theological implications of the changing voices and shifts of grammatical person (among first-, second-, and third-person speech) in relation to which I will briefly locate the approach taken here. In a two-part essay, Carl Bosma retraces the exegetical debate about

whether the psalms should be understood as biographical self-revelation by the poet or as the cultic response of worshipping Israel to the mighty deeds of God.⁸ The two positions in the debate recall Karl Barth's criticism of Friedrich Schleiermacher's theology, which influenced the nineteenth-century psychological or biographical approach to reading psalms, although that exegetical tradition reaches back to the fourth century.

While I do not intend to advance any particular scholarly conversation, it seems to me that choosing sides in this debate is unnecessary because polarizing these two approaches is fundamentally misleading. The public-worship-oriented approach assumes that the poems were written for that purpose while the older biographical-psychological approach assumes that the laments are outpourings of personal torment. It may be that, as Hermann Gunkel holds, cultic/liturgical psalms were adapted for personal use, although it could be that many of the poems began as personal expression and were later located in the public context for general instruction. Perhaps more likely is the possibility that both pathways lie behind different poems. Identifying psalms for one history or the other is not my concern here.

While locating many of the psalms in the setting of public worship is largely warranted by the texts themselves, the personal nature of many psalms, especially the plenteous laments found among the first fifty psalms, suggests that simply ignoring the psychology expressed in theological terms is an egregious misrepresentation of the poems and their function in public worship. Ignoring the pedagogy of the psychology in the texts risks neglecting the ability of the poems to comfort, confront, and even scandalize later readers seeking spiritual nurture and direction. My interest is not in discerning how the Psalter was shaped for Israel's worship but how the poems intend to spiritually and theologically shape later readers to be faithful Israel, for that seems to be the interest of the poets.

Here, I take the position that it is precisely the personal struggles so poignantly expressed by the poets and proclaimed in public that intend to draw Israelites into, or perhaps back into, faithful allegiance to God—not only in times of plenty but also in times of want. Whether these are the poet's own struggles or whether the speaker is a literary fiction is a moot point. Pedagogically speaking, the laments are warranted for public worship because everyone eventually experiences personal defeat of some kind and comes face-to-face with the searing question of theodicy. The theological pedagogy of these poems both prepares and shapes the community to confront the questions of theodicy and empire openly in order to sustain Israel's fundamental theological conviction that the God of Israel is the one and only God of the universe. That is, public worship is not an end in itself. Its design on the hearts and minds of the worshipers is to carry them faithfully through thick and thin. To read the psalms in either psychological or liturgical terms rather than both is to be driven by modern concerns that, in my judgment, miss the subtler point Israel's poets are making. Israel's faith and practice must

8. Bosma 2008, 2009.

be durable. The poets know how difficult faithfulness can be, and their poems meet people where they are.

Notes on Style

Readers will note that I use male pronouns to refer to the authors and the narrators of the psalms as well as God. This is in keeping with the general scholarly assumption that the authors who may or may not be speaking for themselves were men and that the author also assumed that the narrator or implied author (where there is one) was also male. I use male pronouns for God because the Hebrew, a strongly gendered language, uses the masculine forms consistently.

I also substitute the titles “Older Testament” and “Younger Testament” for the standard “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” When the conventional terms were created to distinguish the predominantly Hebrew texts from the Greek texts of the Christian Bible, perhaps they were less value laden than they are today, given that in the ancient world novelty was not prized as it is now. However, it could be that even at their origin they had a supersessionist connotation.⁹ In any case, Christian supersessionism is now increasingly recognized to be problematic, in light of its catastrophic consequences for Jews. The terms that I employ here are simply a nod in the direction of developing a new approach to the attitude of Christianity (and Christians) toward Judaism (and Jews).

I have uppercased Torah when it refers to the Pentateuch. It is lowercased when it refers to divine teaching more broadly.

Ancient Israel and the current nation-state are not to be confused. I have used the terms “Israel” and “Israelites” to refer to the ancient Hebrew-speaking people who wrote the psalms and for whom they were written. This designation overlaps with Jews and Judaism and the Jewish people, depending on one’s dating of individual psalms. I rarely mention the current nation-state, but when I do, I refer to it as the State of Israel.

Translations from the Older Testament are my own unless otherwise noted. In some instances I use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Versification follows the NRSV.

Italics in quotations from various commentators indicate scripture citations where these are so designated in the source.

Finally, the reader will be greatly assisted by reading this commentary with a Bible in hand.

9. This may be the case at 2 Cor. 5:17: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (NRSV).

PSALM 1

Canonical Context and Themes

The canonical authority of the opening poem of the Psalter is vast. Only the final poem has comparable rhetorical power. Here, warning prevails; there celebration triumphs. Psalm 1 is generally understood to have been intentionally placed—perhaps intentionally written—at the head of the Psalter to frame what follows theologically, and so I read it here. Psalm 1 depicts Israel as divided against itself. The spiritually strong who are able to resist bad advice to scorn God’s teaching (torah) will thrive, like fruit-bearing trees, faithful to God’s claim on their lives; those who scoff at torah and do not live by it are depicted as languishing sinners, perishing from their own cynicism.

In light of the psalms that follow, especially in Book 1 of the Psalter (Pss. 1–41), the issue driving the division is theodicy, the goodness and power of God in light of human suffering and Israel’s public defeats. If God does not answer when we are in trouble, is he really “there”? Are we foolish to remain faithful? This penetrating question hangs over the Psalter, bubbling over in the laments and supplications. One of the psalmists’ hopes in writing these poems is to strengthen faithful Israelites that they might cling to God’s power and goodness, come what may.

The many complaints voiced by the confounded righteous, that they are not flourishing but languishing miserably and inexplicably in the dark despair of isolation, rivets the Psalter on theodicy. The faithful are neglected by friends, spurned by family, and even abandoned by God, while the faithless who have given up on God rudely scorn them, seemingly unchastened. Scoffers sneer and jeer at those who hold fast to the teaching of God. Cynical Israelites seem to have the upper hand, since the poem would console the faithful with the eschatological hope that they will ultimately be vindicated while the scoffers will perish. But at the moment, moral justice seems to be upside down! In light of subsequent poems, Ps. 1 daringly frames the persistent message of the Psalter: the faithful

who steadfastly cling to Israel's ancestral faith will eventually flourish; scoffers, who seem to have the upper hand now, will eventually falter. The message of this psalm anticipates the trenchant observation of Ps. 12:1 that faithfulness has vanished from Israel. The faithful feel isolated and ridiculed.

In the fifth century, Theodoret of Cyrus, perhaps sensitive to the dubiousness of the hope that the righteous will soon be vindicated while the wicked will languish, read Ps. 1 precisely this way.¹ The poet is not describing the experience of the faithful but the “dogmatic truth” of the text. This softens the implied anguish of the faithful by shifting their hope to the noetic realm where their vindication is not accomplished empirically but hoped for eschatologically. This takes the pressure off thinking that the vindication of the righteous will be realized any time soon.

The words “dogmatic truth” may not roll trippingly across many tongues today, especially when considering a poem that seems so upbeat on first reading, but Theodoret may have a point. That the wicked will not withstand judgment—presumably in the divine court—and that the righteous will be vindicated for their faithfulness is not a hope for empirical vindication but an exhortation to long-term hope that conceals a threat. If God will stand by this threat in some ultimate way (several of the verbs in the poem are in the future tense), one ignores this notice at one's peril. As a frame for the Psalter, Ps. 1 is exquisitely ambiguous, offering comfort and encouragement with one hand and challenge and threat with the other. Psalm 1 is a warning label.

Structure and Dynamics

Psalm 1's six terse verses depict the strength of the pious (1:1–3), mark the weakness of the impious and their ultimate fate (1:4–5), and commend the vindication of the righteous and the demise of the wicked (1:6).

Spiritual Strength (1:1–3)

The featured signature of the pious who prosper spiritually and morally, although they may languish socially or perhaps even physically, is their ability to resist the skepticism to which those who scoff at them succumb. By contrast, the wicked are those who scoff at faithfulness (*lesim*), thus adumbrating the lament psalms that follow, in which the oppressed speakers chafe under the scorn of their opponents. That the opening verse of the Psalter abjures the ridicule of the faithful suggests that the lament psalms stand in the background and the theodicy question (which first appears at Ps. 3) in the fore. Strength here is the ability to resist the tempting advice of the wicked to abandon the way that God has set forth in torah (1:2). To be like a flourishing tree that bears fruit and whose leaves do not wither because it is planted near water (1:3) is not an absolute value or standard

1. Theodoret 2000, 50–51.

to which one adheres; it is an image of resilience, of one's ability to withstand drought—that is, resist the scornful ways of the wicked, who scoff at God's way because of God's silence before the suffering of his devotees.

The poet is exquisitely sensitive to the temptation to succumb to mocking godliness, and he exalts those who successfully resist. Those who thwart skepticism by remaining faithful are cognizant of how their behavior reflects God's teaching (1:2). They are Israel's true heroes.

Spiritual Weakness (1:4–5)

The weakness of the spiritually vapid who scorn God contrasts with the strength of the spiritually resilient who successfully resist the temptation to cynicism. The wicked are not evil in a criminal or psychological sense. Rather, they cannot withstand spiritual and theological challenge and succumb to skepticism; their weakness is elicited by God's hiddenness, evidenced by Israel's setbacks. Again, spiritually sturdy members of the community are not deterred by spiritually feebler members but see beyond spiritual weakness—succumbing to the temptation to religious assimilation—and tenaciously adhere to God's goodness and power on behalf of Israel, even when they are not evident.

Spiritual Vindication (1:6)

Not surprisingly, the final verse of the Psalter's opening poem reassures the psalmist's hearers that God will protect the righteous and abandon the wicked, even though the laments still cry plaintively for just such vindication. Thus the Psalter's brief opening poem anticipates the cry of later poems to resist skepticism. It proclaims God's ultimate alliance with those spiritually robust enough to hold fast to God's way, even when empirical evidence bespeaks a contrary reality.

Theological Pedagogy

Read in light of the laments that follow, in which the righteous are constantly assailed by scoffers and even tempted by the very doubts eloquently voiced by skeptics, Ps. 1 stands as a fiery gateway to the Psalter. Piety in Israel is not stress-free. God's power and presence are not evident in every circumstance; each Israelite must decide how to respond. If the laments, including their several imprecations, do stand behind the rallying cry of this song, Ps. 1 identifies the theological hope driving many of the poems in the collection. Even if the pious currently languish outwardly and the impious flourish outwardly, it behooves Israel to resist abandoning the ancestral faith. The theodicy question looms large over the Psalter, and Ps. 1 anticipates the concern even before it is voiced by Ps. 3. Israel simply cannot succumb to the temptation of abandoning God as some apparently have, worshipping other gods. Israel's very honor as the people of God is at stake; beyond

it lurks the integrity of God's identity as the creator of heaven and earth, which the nations must eventually admit.

If the author of Ps. 1 does have the sufferers of the lament psalms in mind as he writes, he is preaching a searingly urgent message. "Happiness" lies not in the signs of outward success that others, including the wicked, may enjoy, but in the joy of a conscious faithfulness to the way God has called his people to go, regardless of the price. Even if God is silent and does not restore the godly to positions of honor and status in the short term, the faithful triumph spiritually because they are the strong trees that bear fruit and vibrant leaves; they know themselves to be so, and that is rewarding. The wicked may insult them, but their failure to defeat faithfulness in Israel renders their chatter like empty chaff that the wind disperses (1:4). No one of moral substance can be taken in by them; as for those lacking in moral substance, well, the godly need not be perturbed. They will compassionately seek to raise the faithless to a higher level, leading by example. Being a faithful Israelite, Jew, or Christian is not easy, but dignified and honorable, making it possible to rest in one's integrity as one of God's flourishing "trees."