

Twin Themes for Ecumenical Singing: The Psalms

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Perhaps the most interesting and difficult interpretive issue in the Old Testament (both in the text itself and in our on-going interpretive work) is the adjudication of alternative, competing textual traditions.

I.

These quite distinctive traditions voice different theological passions and expectations, and they reflect very different socio-political contexts. On the one hand there is an interpretive tradition that is rooted in *memories of Moses and the covenant of Sinai* that received dynamic articulation in the Book of Deuteronomy. This tradition sought to bring every aspect of social life under the rule of the emancipatory God of the Exodus. This was done by the on-going extension of Torah claims from the basic rule of the Decalogue through the Book of Deuteronomy. The social rootage of this tradition was no doubt in village life in such “towns” as Tekoa, Anathoth, Moresheth in Gath, Nazareth, and Bethlehem. These villages were inhabited by agricultural peasants who lived a subsistence existence without any margin of safety or well-being. For that reason, these peasants knew of great risks, and consequently they knew that life had to be lived attentively. This interpretive tradition expressed the passion of a community that was *rigorously normed*, that knew the right way life should be lived, and that understood the hard outcomes of a poorly lived life. That community took the tradition of Deuteronomy as both a narrative base-line and a continuing process of interpretation.

On the other hand, there is the textual tradition generated by the royal-priestly-scribal enterprise of Jerusalem, the city that was the economic engine for surplus wealth and the temple site of liturgical imagination that legitimated an economy of privilege and a politics of hierarchal power. This tradition pivots around God’s sure promise to David and the celebrated economic success of Solomon, and dared to appropriate the old divine promise to Abraham to which the chosen in Jerusalem claimed to be heirs. These “heirs” could easily accept that their urban prosperity and security were God’s gift to them, and they could readily imagine and expect an ebulliently expansive political economy grounded in God’s unconditional fidelity.

These two traditions offered ancient Israel very different competing visions of life and faith; both made claim to be the proper and legitimate version of covenantal faith. The adjudication of these traditions is an on-going enterprise in scripture. Thus for example, in Psalm 89: 3-4, 19-20, 28-29, the durability of God’s promise to David is celebrated and affirmed. In Psalm 132, however, the promise to David is severely modified by the “if” of Deuteronomy:¹

The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he would not turn back:
“One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne.
If your sons keep my covenant and my decrees that I shall teach them,
their sons also, forevermore, shall sit on the throne.” (Psalm 132:11-12)

The unconditional quality of the divine promise is now circumscribed by Torah obedience.

Given these tensions, we imagine that Israel had the hard work of generating a hymnal for all Israelites. The work must have been done in a committee that eventually produced the canonical book of Psalms. Like every hymnal committee, this committee had, perforce, reliable representatives of these several traditions who advocated for their favorite hymn-Psalms. One could imagine that there were debates and arguments that ended, like every hymnal, in compromise. The outcome of committee work in the book of Psalms reflects that tension at the very outset. Psalm 1 is reflective of the Moses tradition with phrasing that is clearly reminiscent of Deuteronomy. Psalm 1 is not really a Psalm; it is rather a preface (as in every hymnal) that suggests to users of the hymnal how the ensuing hymns are to be sung.² Thus the hymnal committee proposes that all the Psalms should be sung by a community that is rigorously normed according to the Torah of Moses. That orientation pertains, moreover, even in hymns that do not mention Torah. Along the way the hymnal committee has situated specific Torah hymns at strategic places to reassert the Torah emphasis, notably in Psalms 19 and 119.³ The singing of this community is the acknowledgement that its life consists in living in response to the mandates of Torah with the outcomes that result from such a life of glad obedience.

This Torah piety, however, does not singularly dominate the formation of the Book of Psalms. This is evident in the placement of Psalm 2, surely treasured by the Jerusalem community and its liturgy. This Psalm introduces into the liturgical imagination of Israel that dramatic moment in which God designates and authorizes “my son,” that is, the Davidic king (v. 7). It is anticipated that this newly designated and anointed king in Jerusalem will be dominant in the earth, an anticipation quite alien to the Torah-party but surely cherished by the king-party.

Thus at the outset, the Book of Psalms voices two modes of faith, life, and hope that run all through the Psalter and the Bible. It is possible that the Torah party was not persuaded by the royal claims made in Psalm 2. It is equally thinkable that the king-party was not too much moved by the rigorous norming of the Torah in Psalm 1. But both Psalms are there at the outset, making the Psalter an ecumenical book that, like every ecumenical effort, requires attentiveness to voices other than the ones we prefer and with which we are most comfortable.⁴

I have no wish to impose an anachronism or a caricature on the Book of Psalms. Nevertheless it occurs to me that without undue strain, it is possible to identify that continuing tension among us. Thus, for example, imagine villagers, rural folk, who are committed to rigorous social moral norms of a traditional kind. They may look askance at urban folk who play fast and loose with too many norms, perhaps especially concerning sexuality and money. Conversely we may think of urban folk who “live large” and who find old-fashioned morality from “back home” passé and excessively restraining. Imagine a hymn book committee of *rural conservatives* and *urban liberals* who may make a song book together. Each party is willing, perhaps reluctantly, to join in singing of hymns that the other party treasures. Such an ecumenical enterprise amounts to a recognition that neither party, neither the *rigorous normers of conservatism* nor the *bullish expansionist liberals* can have the final word about the collection. Neither gets to sound the final word of truth. That last truth is

found in the God addressed in the singing, the One who outflanks all of our favorite formulations.

II.

Psalms 1 is *transactional* in an assertive, confident pedagogical style: good behavior yields good outcomes! The Psalm aims to inculcate the young into a set of certitudes acquired by experience, observation, and revelation. The voice of this Psalm knows about the “wicked, sinners, and scoffers” because in a rural village, everyone knows about everyone; there is no place to hide. These are observable neighbors who are shiftless and unreliable. One can spot them by their careless way with their livestock, by their indolence in letting mown hay get rained on, by seeing how crooked their rows of maize are, plus rumors of unpaid debts.

Anybody can see what happens to such neighbors. They have crop failure. They renege on bank loans. They lose the farm. Or as the poem avers, “They perish” (v. 6). Soon enough they become hapless renters, tenants who stay only temporarily. And the next spring they must move again and find another place to inhabit temporarily. One can easily notice their specific acts of neglect and irresponsibility. But these specific acts amount, in the horizon of the Psalm, to a way of life, a path to walk. The poem uses an agricultural image to characterize them: “chaff,” the residue from grain that is light and without substance, blown away by any whiff of wind, no staying power.

The instructive voice of this Psalm does not intend to have any children to grow up this way. It is expected and assumed that children in this family and tribe are on the way to becoming responsible, reliable adults who have appropriated for themselves the norms that have caused this family, tribe, and village to prosper.

Beyond flat instruction, the poetry of the Psalm playfully engages a metaphor to aid in the pedagogy. This playful metaphor keeps the poem from becoming excessively didactic. The image is of a flourishing tree fed by a reliable stream of water, a noticeable marker in an arid climate. Such trees stand out in contrast to low-life shrubbery that can barely survive in rocky soil. This pedagogy, with a suggestive imagination, urges its addressees to choose that life. Thus one can hear an echo of Deuteronomy in this pedagogy: “I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity.... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:15, 19).

This is a once-for-all choice about the direction of one’s life. But it is a choice made over and over again in actual lived circumstance that concerns political economy and neighborly infrastructure. It is this “over and over” quality that requires us to sing about it over and over. Thus the meditating “day and night” on Torah is an acute and lively awareness that we live in a normed world that will not be mocked with impunity. This introductory paragraph to the Psalter defines the folk for whom the hymnal is intended. This community consists in prosperous rural land-owners who are savvy about agricultural work, who manage a subsistence income to assure well-being, and who know the rhythms of the soil that are credited to the creator God who presides over the landscape with a rigorous unfailing (so the Psalm!) reliability.

While Torah instruction focuses on specific actions, such actions have important social outcomes. This ready capacity for responsible living delineates the limits of the “congregation of the righteous.” In a rural community, the membership in a local congregation does not change much from generation to generation because the membership consists in land-owners who manage responsibly and transmit the land

in good order to the rising generation. In the end, the Psalm is confident that the creator God is the guarantor of an orderly world wherein seed-time and harvest follow reliably; one must be prepared to engage in and rely upon that orderliness. When one disregards or mocks that order, there are practical costly consequences. It is no wonder that the village engages in a rigorous norming. The world is dangerous. And we know in some great part how it works and what is required of us. Imagine this community of Psalm 1 and the Psalms that follow singing together:

We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand;
God sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain,
The breezes and the sunshine, and soft refreshing rain.⁵

The singing community knows about the work to be done; it also knows the terms through which gifts are given. By the time we get to Psalm 19, another Torah Psalm, we are able to sing the Torah of the Lord as restorative:

The Torah of the Lord is perfect, reviving the self;
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
(Psalm 19:7-8)

The Torah, moreover, is more precious than making money:

More to be desired than gold, even much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb. (v. 10)

One might easily imagine that the “wicked, sinners, and scoffers” would not comprehend this calculus. It is, however, precisely this calculus that calls into being the singing congregation that is joyfully, gladly, obediently at home in the creation that God has ordered toward abundance.

III.

When we read Psalm 2, the second introductory Psalm, we are in a very different world. Psalm 2 is daringly *transformational*. It anticipates that the Davidic king in Jerusalem will, by power and with full divine authorization, become dominant in the earth and among the nations of the world. Thus in what must have been a liturgical performance (a liturgical performance likely reiterated with regularity), the Davidic king is invested with the full authority of the creator God to work the will of the creator God among the nations. (Happily for the king, the will of the creator God coincides with the wants of the urban elite who support the king!) The Psalm and its liturgical performance constitute an act of immense imagination, for the promise of the Psalm is completely disproportionate to the actual power and capacity of the Jerusalem establishment. The Psalm and its performance permitted the urban elites to cluster (as always) around the hope of expansion of commerce and international

trade that would produce much surplus wealth.

The only way such extravagant imagination can be sustained is to have the royal claim deeply rooted in the doxological reality of the creator God. Thus behind the royal authorization in verses 6-7, there is the God who “sits in the heavens” and laughs mockingly at the pretense of the nations that think they can compete with the Davidic king (vv. 4-5). Such defiant pretense by the nations (vv. 1-3) is a bad joke. It is because of the unchallenged authority of the creator God that the Davidic establishment in Jerusalem can make its theo-political claim to power and authority over the nations, a claim echoed in ways we do not notice in the final affirmation of Matthew 28:18. This authorization leads to a scenario in which the kings of the nations will “wisely” (v. 10) “kiss the feet” in glad subjugation 9 (v. 12).

It is clear that in this Psalm, a second introduction to the Psalter, we are a very long way from the close transactional reasoning of Psalm 1. Here there are no commandments given to the king, no Torah on which to meditate “day and night,” no warning about the danger of waywardness, and no thought of “perishing” for disobedience.⁶ Now the accent is singularly on the potent capacity of the authorized king to work his will on the earth. It is anticipated (as in the parallel liturgical affirmation of Isaiah 9:7) that “his authority will grow continually” without limit or restraint. We Christians have absorbed this expansionist tone by reading the Psalter in “Messianic” ways, so that the expansionist rhetoric pertains to the rule of Christ.

We may notice three emergences from this introductory Psalm that instruct us to read the Psalter with reference to the transformative capacity of the royal regime. First, there are sprinkled through the Psalter a series of “royal Psalms” that variously reflect the centrality of kings for Israel. Among them is anticipation of royal domination in Psalm 110: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool..../The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath” (vv. 1, 5). Remarkably it is not the king, but the Lord who will accomplish this on behalf of the king. Perhaps most important is Psalm 72 that affirms that the royal commitment to social justice for the poor and needy will cause the earth to flourish:

May the mountains yield prosperity,
and the hills in righteousness.
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
and give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor. (vv. 2-4)

Second, as we move through the Psalter, we notice that the accent on the human Davidic king ebbs and is displaced by celebration of the divine king, YHWH. In the “Enthronement Psalms” (Pss. 96-99), it is anticipated that the dramatic enthronement of YHWH in the Jerusalem temple would bring joy in creation as all parts of creation are restored by the new divine rule. The coming of the divine king is abruptly transformative:

The Lord is king!...
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
Let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy. (vv. 10-12)

No imagination is required to see that the new rule of God, directly (Psalm 96) or through the human king (Psalm 72), is transformative of “climate change”!

Third, it is worth noticing that the formula of royal designation in Psalm 2:7 (“You are my son”) is reiterated in the gospel tradition at the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:11). The gospel tradition attests the authorization of Jesus as king and messiah by the formula, and thereby draws the Jesus narrative into the orbit of royal claim. The gospel narrative does this, even though Jesus seems to resist that designation, perhaps because he is rooted in the Torah tradition or perhaps because the political risk of such claim could not be made too early: this claim for Jesus “is already to set up a clash between the ‘gospel’ of the empire and the gospel of the kingdom of God.... We can hardly, then, read Mark’s opening lines without recognizing that the Gospel’s central character is on a collision course with Caesar.”⁷ When the Psalms are read through the lens of Christological claim (as with Augustine and Bonhoeffer), then the force of Psalm 2 becomes most crucial for our approach to the canonical book of Psalms.⁸

IV.

The committee that compiled the Book of Psalms refused to choose between these two introductory Psalms and placed them together at the outset as a required guide. It did that even though there was no doubt strong advocacy by both the Torah party and the king party. If either advocacy had prevailed to the elimination of the other introductory Psalm, we would be invited to read the Psalter in very different ways. In its wisdom, however, the committee refused such an option and insisted that both Psalms must be introductions. Both traditions must be given full voice from the outset, because in an ecumenical enterprise, no significant voice must be silenced or eliminated.

Thus as we begin the Psalter, we have Psalm 1 that is *compellingly transactional*; it intends, by disciplined obedience, to maintain a steady state of social order without radical disruption. We have alongside Psalm 2 that is *powerfully transformative*; it insists that the mobilization of the will of the creator via the Jerusalem establishment will generate an economy of prosperous wellbeing. As we read the Psalms, it will be useful for the reader (and the reading congregation) to consider the way in which we ourselves variously tilt toward transactional modes of life and faith, or bend toward transformational modes of life and faith.

In her recent fine book on presidential leadership, Doris Kearns Godwin has shown that our strongest, most effective US presidents have a capacity for combining *transactional and transformative* modes of work. Thus Lincoln was at his most transformational in the Emancipation Proclamation. But as the film *Lincoln* has made clear, Lincoln had to be transactional by coercion, cajoling, and bribery to win passage of the Proclamation. Likewise Lyndon Johnson was powerfully transformational in his passion for civil rights legislation. But he too had to be his most cunning transactional self to get the bill through congress. Godwin has shown that both modes of behavior are required for a viable society. Thus in an early anticipation of Godwin’s thesis, our Psalms committee clearly understood that Israel could not choose between the Psalms; Israel had to have both at the very outset of the Psalter.

I can, moreover, imagine yet another dramatic moment in the life of the canonizing committee. It was the occasion when both parties—of Torah and of king—became staggeringly aware that their most treasured faith claims were not fully reliable. The

Torah-party had to conclude that rigorous Torah obedience did not fully guarantee good outcomes, so that the wonderment of Job rang true for them: “Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? (Job 21:7).” (See Jeremiah 12:1). These passionate Torah advocates finally had to assert:

We have not forgotten you,
or been false to your covenant.
Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way,
yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals,
and covered us with deep darkness. (Psalm 44:17-19)

In the same moment, I imagine, the king-party had to recognize that the unconditional divine promise to the king would not hold, even though Psalm 89, a favorite royal hymn, had boasted of divine “steadfast love” toward the king. They had to groan out: “Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?” (Psalm 89:49).

In that moment of honesty and disillusionment, the committee, with all of its several advocacies, was required to make a leap into new Psalms they had not expected to need. As a result, the canonical committee added to its hymnal as many as fifty Psalms of lament, protest, and complaint that honesty required of them.¹⁰ In this fresh genre of Psalms, Israel (and the committee) did not turn away from YHWH. But they knew, from that moment forward, that honest faith required more than *determined transactionalism* (as in Psalm 1) and more than *buoyant expectation* (as in Psalm 2). The outcome is a collection of songs and hymns that explore the full range of human emotion, the full spectrum of historical emergences, and the full repertoire of ways in which the God of all truth can be addressed. In our reading of the Psalms, it is crucial to begin with Psalms 1 and 2 and observe our predecessors in faith in their several advocacies. But having done that, it is then essential to ask what new songs our context and circumstance require of us now, songs that heretofore we never knew we would need. The challenge is to mobilize the entire repertoire of human emotions, historical emergences, and ways of addressing the God of all truth. This is a much thicker repertoire than timid contemporary lectionary committees have in mind. The old Psalm committee was more prescient than most of our present practice; we may benefit from their venturesome Psalm-making.

Notes

1. On the “if” of Deuteronomy, see Salter Brueggemann, *Solomon: Israel’s Ironic Icon of Human Achievement* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 139-159.
2. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 516, has noted that in the Western Text of Acts 13:33, the quote from the second Psalm is cited as “the first Psalm.” This suggests either Psalm 1 was not in purview so that it was not reckoned as a Psalm but as an introduction. Childs comments on the way in which the two Psalms are as offered “a part of the introduction to the whole Psalter.”
3. See James L. Mays, “The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter,” *JBL* 106 (1987) 3-12.
4. It is often noted that the first line of Psalm 1 and the last line of Psalm 2 are parallel; this similarity suggests that the two lines form an *inclusio* that intentionally binds the two Psalms together.
5. “We Plow the Fields and Scatter,” *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 560. I am astonished to find that the hymn is omitted

from most recent hymnals including the new Presbyterian hymnal. That omission is likely the work of “urban elites” who regard “plowing and scattering” as remote from lived reality, alas!

6. The single Deuteronomic attempt to curb royal ebullience by an insistence on Torah provides that the king must attend to the Torah in a way that sounds almost like “day and night.”

He shall have a copy of this Torah written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life....”(Deut. 17:18-19)

7. Richard B. Hayes, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 92.

8. See Jason Bayasee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

9. Doris Kearns Godwin, *Leadership in Turbulent Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).

10. The fullest exposition of the Lament Psalms we have is by Fredrik Lindstrom, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994).