

Psalm 91: Confidence in the Face of Terror

Brennan W. Breed

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

I. Counteracting Power of Anxiety

Let's face it: the world is a scary place. For many of us, it feels like the further we venture into the twenty-first century, the more ominous it gets. We are witnessing the rise of climate chaos and resulting natural disasters, international fascistic movements, unapologetic racism and sexism, militarized law enforcement, the constant threat of war, an economic structure that funnels ever more money to a vanishingly small elite, the debt burden necessary for young people to join the workforce, the breakdown of institutional norms and safeguards, and much more. Some of us may have enough political, social, and economic insulation that we do not notice these trends, but the news every morning provides ample evidence that danger lurks all around. As truth-telling ministers of the gospel, it is important to let people know that they are not merely paranoid. The growing crisis of mental health in the United States is not only the result of imbalanced brain chemistry and improper treatment. We are responding to real events ongoing in the world.

This situation, however, is not entirely new. Life in the ancient Near East, for example, was always precarious. While the psalms were being composed, the average life expectancy was somewhere around twenty-five years.¹ If people were lucky enough to live past ten years of age, they would likely live to thirty-five. Only a precious few survived longer than that. Childbirth in particular was a source of both infant and maternal mortality, but disease and malnutrition were ever-present threats to all who were fortunate enough to survive their first few hours. Political instability, war, and pillaging, all common yet unpredictable, were also constant threats to human life. At any moment, one's life could be overturned or lost. And yet, in the midst of this terrifying instability and uncertainty, someone wrote Psalm 91—a poem voicing unwavering trust in God's absolute protection.

For many of us today, our anxieties and fears make it difficult to speak about the future without inserting a cautionary phrase about whether or not there will actually be a future. It feels strange, perhaps false, for many today to declare boldly that God is "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust" (Ps 91:2). Yet our ancestors in the faith knew well that saying something out loud did something. Speech has the performative power to change the events of the world. It can create ("I now pronounce you..."), it can destroy ("I hereby dissolve..."), it can re-frame ("We need to talk...").² The Old Testament thematizes the creative power of speech, starting with the creative speech of God in Genesis 1:3. As Walter Brueggemann argues, "In a practical way, speech leads reality in the Old Testament. Speech constitutes reality."³ Speech acts such as the priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24-26 recall the creative word of God and so yield "a new creation again being wrought out of chaos."⁴ Likewise, the act of uttering the prophetic imagination is a "world-making" act that opens up the possibility of a new creation emerging where it was not possible before.⁵ Psalm 91 participates in this theology of "world-making speech" that struggles against the forces of chaos and death. And it is this aspect of the psalm that might best help

contemporary Christians understand its function in our lives.

According to verse 1, the addressee of the psalm is “the one who dwells in the protection of the Most High.” Psalm 91 is, then, an individual psalm, addressed to someone who already trusts in YHWH and yet keenly feels the presence of existential threats. The speaker of vv. 1-13 teaches the addressee how to respond to distress without giving in to fear. At the end of the poem, God speaks an oracle of salvation directly to the addressee (vv. 14-16). The assumed setting of the psalm seems to be the temple in Jerusalem, and thus the implied speaker is a priest and the implied addressee is a terrified worshipper who has come to the temple for help.⁶ Other psalms of trust (see Pss 23; 121) lack the oracular and didactic setting of the psalm; from these elements of Psalm 91, we can infer that priests would recommend Psalm 23 and 121 to be recited by those who were in need of comfort. Thus, Psalm 91 provides a fairly unique insight into ancient pastoral care.

In Psalm 91, the speaker refers to God several times as a provider of shelter, refuge, and defense (91:2, 4, 9); God offers this protection in the form of walls, shields, and wings. These images are reminiscent of the Jerusalem temple, where the wings of the cherubim on the ark were a symbol of YHWH’s powerful presence (Exod 25:20-22). Even the names of God used in v. 1 are ancient Canaanite names found in relation to the Jerusalem temple (Gen 14:19-20). This psalm, then, addresses someone who has already committed himself to the love and care of YHWH, the God of the temple in Jerusalem. Yet even though this individual trusts in God, mortal danger surrounds on all sides (v. 7). This individual is threatened by a wide array of evils that take various shapes and work around the clock (night, day, dark, noontime; vv. 4-5). These descriptions are reminiscent of someone who struggles with anxiety (something that nearly a quarter of the world’s population deals with on an annual basis). While fear is “an alarm response to present or immanent danger,” anxiety is “a future-oriented” state of “preparation for possible, upcoming negative events” that are not present.⁷ In other words, anxiety is a generalized fear that dangers exist everywhere, constantly threatening, but hidden just outside of view. For these individuals, it is important to address patterns of thought that focus on perceived dangers by re-framing their situation. Among the most recommended treatments for those suffering from generalized anxiety disorders are conversations with trusted interlocutors who can re-create the sufferer’s world with their words, and practices of meditation and prayer that can refocus the individual on what is actually present. These practices seem to align with vv. 1-2 of Psalm 91: namely, the speaker re-frames the sufferer’s world by calling to mind the sufferer’s true identity and the actual state of affairs, (namely, that the sufferer is in the protection of God Almighty), and the speaker offers words of meditation for the sufferer to repeat in times of need that constantly reaffirm this frame.

II. Counteracting the Forces of Evil

In the history of the interpretation of Psalm 91, the vast majority of Jewish and Christian readers have assumed that the terrors referred to in vv. 4-5 are, at least in part, demonic powers. For example, the phrase “noontime demon,” a monastic expression for depressive episodes assumed to be the result of demonic attacks, derives from the Greek translation of v. 6. Contemporary mainline Christians in the United States, however, are often reticent to discuss demons and spiritual warfare. Perhaps surprisingly, most of the authors and editors of the Old Testament seemed to share

their concerns (the authors of the New Testament, on the other hand, held a very different conviction). Whereas their ancient Near Eastern neighbors discussed demons often and performed rituals to both appease and repel them, ancient Israelite scribes minimized the discussion of demonic forces. Instead of sacrificing animals and manipulating their blood to scare away demons, as the Babylonian rituals surrounding their Akitu festival prescribe, Israelites are told to sacrifice in order to atone for their own sins (see Lev 4:23-26; 17:7).⁸ Instead of blaming their misfortunes on demons, as ancient Hittite soldiers did, Israelites were generally instructed to see YHWH as the source of both fortune and misfortune alike (see Job 1:21) and even “evil” spirits (1 Sam 16:14; 1 Kings 22:23). The authors and editors of the Old Testament were trying to shape a tradition that focused on one God alone, and constant references to demons—who were recipients of sacrifice throughout the ancient Near East—would have complicated this message.

Yet Psalm 91 contains some of the most obvious references to demonic powers in all of the Old Testament (vv. 5-6). The poem suggests that the enemies that threaten us are greater than merely human political opponents, natural disasters, and illness. It is no coincidence that, in the New Testament, both clear references to this psalm are found in contexts that have to do with demonic powers (Matt 4:6//Luke 4:10-11; Luke 10:19). And throughout the histories of Judaism and Christianity, Psalm 91 has been understood to possess apotropaic powers that could protect the speaker from evil. The Greek, Syriac, and Aramaic translations of Psalm 91 all use the word for “demon.”⁹ Also, an unusual version of the psalter from Qumran includes Psalm 91 in an exorcistic appendix (11Q11). More than eighty anti-demonic objects from the ancient world have been discovered with inscriptions of at least part of Psalm 91.¹⁰ Many of these were worn as amulets to keep the wearer safe from demonic attack. Even today, many Christians around the world use Psalm 91 as an incantation or in amulet form.¹¹

Most ancient Israelite scribes involved in the construction of Old Testament texts seem to have believed that mention of demonic forces would distract from the message of “YHWH alone.” Yet there remained a wary fascination with demons that emerges in biblical texts on occasion (see Lev 16:10; Isa 34:14), suggesting that even the most ardent Yahwists suspected that evil powers did roam the earth. Eventually, Israel encountered an event so traumatic that its theologians revisited their firm belief that all good and evil came from God—namely, the persecution of Antiochus IV in 167 BCE (see Daniel 8:9-14), which led to the formation of new explanations for the existence and occasional victories of evil in the world. Ultimately, groups of Jews such as the Dead Sea Scroll community, the followers of John the Baptist, and the followers of Jesus developed a robust theology of spiritual warfare. Perhaps modern Christians who are troubled by nonspecific anxieties can sympathize with the ancient belief that evil forces lurk in the world, since it seems that the chaos surrounding us cannot be easily localized and controlled. While Leviticus teaches that sin comes from the human heart, Frederick Buechner suggests that “to take the Devil seriously is to take seriously the fact that the total evil in the world is greater than the sum of all its parts.”¹²

For its part, Psalm 91 suggests that evil is an active power in the world that opposes both God and the living. Yet the psalm does not prescribe the creation of a magic amulet or a spell to counter the power of evil.¹³ Instead, it recommends speak-

ing your faith out loud. In verse 2, the one who has put trust in YHWH is directed to say to God, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.” While this may sound like an incantation, it functions as a declaration of trust. And if one’s trust is faltering in light of overwhelming threats, perhaps this speaking out loud will create precisely that which one lacks. Who are we to stand against the forces of evil, let alone pestilence, natural disasters, and misfortune? We are the ones who have put our trust in the one who delivers (v. 3). Speaking out loud may help the sufferer who imagines threat to be dispersed throughout the world, constantly “out there” without reprieve.

Psychologists, psychoanalysts, and pastors have long recognized the power of speech to address internal crises. One recent study shows that when people of faith doubt their ability to meet their goals, their commitment fails—yet when they are reminded of their already-expressed faith in a powerful God, they regain their confidence and recommit themselves to achieving their goals.¹⁴ The act of speaking one’s commitment does not just remind one of its existence—it quite literally reconstitutes it and gives one the confidence to press on in the midst of substantial obstacles.

Perhaps this is why Psalm 91 incorporates the metaphor of *the way*—namely, that life is a journey we all undertake. In verse 11, the speaker reassures the addressee that God will command the divine host to watch over our “ways,” or any path that we happen to take. We are protected from stubbing our toes when traveling (v. 12) and from dangerous animals that we may meet on the path (v. 13). These proclamations are metaphorical, just as the setting in the temple functions as a metaphor: God protects us throughout the journey of life, and all the dangers that have threatened us so far have come to naught because of God’s saving presence. We are all here right now because nothing yet has overcome us. At every minute of every day, we owe our existence and persistence entirely to God (see also Ps 104:27-30).

Yet Psalm 91 might make some Christians feel uncomfortable because of what seems to be the transactional nature of this psalm. It might appear that if you say these precise words, then you will see this positive result. The extreme confidence of vv. 7 and 10 might feel a bit like magic (which is condemned in Deut 18:10, for example). Since God is sovereign, we have no ability to force God to respond to our personal crises with saving help, and all of us have witnessed times when God’s saving help did not arrive. How can saying some words give us total confidence that we will not succumb to the world’s threats?

Here again, Psalm 91 speaks in specific ways that people in extreme duress might understand. According to recent research, people in a low state of confidence (often resulting from perceived insecurity) process information differently from those in a position of high confidence (derived often from their perceived security¹⁵). Those with low confidence focus on concrete information, whereas secure individuals better process abstract and nuanced information. Yes, it is indeed shocking to me, someone with a rather secure life at the moment, that Psalm 91:11-13 tells us that we will walk on poisonous serpents and not be harmed. Yet Psalm 91 speaks in a concrete language that fearful people understand, just as Psalm 1 tells us that the wicked will face justice and the righteous will succeed—even in the face of evidence to the contrary. It is undeniably true that I will die, and in that moment Psalm 91’s braggadocio will seem to have failed. But until that very moment, the optimistic encouragement of Psalm 91 will do more to motivate and sustain me through life’s trials than all the carefully

nuanced theological treatises about God's sovereignty. This is, incidentally, how I understand Romans 8:28-39, which reads to me like an exegesis of Psalm 91.

Moreover, we have millennia of proof that this reading of Psalm 91 works: in Christian liturgy, for example, Psalm 91 has consistently played a key role in bringing comfort to vulnerable worshippers, particularly those who were getting ready to sleep—notably the most restless time for sufferers of anxiety. Both Caesarius and Cassiodorus (6th c. CE) describe Psalm 91 as a daily evening song, and Benedict of Nursia (6th c. CE) added Psalm 91 to the nighttime prayer ritual of Compline.¹⁶ In rabbinic midrash, for example, one finds the opinion that Moses crafted Psalm 91 while ascending to heaven in order to defend himself against demonic assault (*Num. Rab.* 12:3; *Midr. Teh.* 91). The Talmud refers to R. Levi's practice of praying Psalm 91 before sleep every night, while the important thirteenth-century CE commentator R. Meir of Rothenburg and the fifteenth-century Talmudist Jacob Weil even said it before naps.¹⁷

III. Counteracting the Dominating Powers of This World

In the Gospels, references to Psalm 91 appear three times. Two of these references are Synoptic Gospel parallels (Matt 4:6//Luke 4:10-11) concerning Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Perhaps ironically, it is the Devil who quotes this anti-demonic psalm, showing that scripture can be used for evil purposes. The Devil (called "the tempter" in Matthew) tells Jesus to jump from the Jerusalem temple, because God's angels will save him, referring to Psalm 91:11-12. Yet Jesus responds that this would be a forbidden testing of God, likely since Jesus would be putting himself in intentional danger simply to see if God would save him (Matt 4:7//Luke 4:12; cf. Deut 6:16). It is possible that the Gospels are implicitly arguing against the common use of Psalm 91 as a magical or exorcistic incantation, which existed even in Jesus' own day (as in 11Q11). In Matthew and Luke's reading of Psalm 91, it is a peoples' lived and professed faith that will remind them of YHWH's salvific protection; the psalm emphatically does not, however, counsel one to show off one's power by commanding YHWH to save whenever one feels like it (91:1, 9, 14-15).¹⁸

Yet, some interpreters who focused more closely on verses 13-16 than verses 5-6 have come to slightly different conclusions. While vv. 1-11 promise divine protection for the faithful in light of troubles of many kinds, v. 13 describes the addressee trampling on various dangerous animals, and in v. 15 God promises to honor the addressee. Thus, in addition to divine protection, the end of the poem promises that the faithful will themselves be triumphant and made worthy of esteem. Several biblical scholars have argued that the image of trampling upon serpents and lions participates in a larger ancient Near Eastern royal motif of kingly power over the powers of chaos.¹⁹ Psalm 91 may have served as a cultic blessing for a king heading into battle. In this context, the references to armor (v. 4), arrows (v. 5), thousands of casualties (v. 7), an encampment (v. 10), and trampling predators (v. 13) cast the entire poem as a discussion of a pitched battle.

Jesus himself refers to Psalm 91 in his reaction to the testimony that the seventy disciples sent ahead of him exercised power over demons (Luke 10:17). Jesus claims that he gave the disciples this authority "to tread on snakes" and "the power of the enemy," thus interpreting the disciples' newfound power in terms of Psalm 91:13. While the reference to demonic powers seems very similar to the apotropaic readings

above, Luke's Jesus draws a connection between the power to subdue evil spirits and the legitimation of those who have been divinely entrusted with authority. While Jesus' message is meant to validate the power of those who are preaching the message that "the Kingdom of God has come near to you" (Luke 10:9), it has unfortunately been co-opted many times in history by those who understand the Gospel in a triumphalist, nationalistic, and militaristic fashion.

Emperor Constantine, for example, used imagery drawn from Psalm 91 to adorn imperial imagery and to demonize his political opponents.²⁰ Constantine's use of Psalm 91:13 combines the political authority of the emperor with the spiritual authority of Christ, and likewise identifies the military enemies of the empire with the spiritual enemies of God. Those who oppose the emperor are explicitly in league with the Devil, and those who support the emperor support Christ. Similar examples of the abuse of this psalm abound: a Byzantine emperor trampled his opponents to death in a stadium as the crowd chanted Psalm 91, crusaders prayed Psalm 91 to protect them as they set out on their path of terror, and Chuck Norris wrote an Islamophobic book based on his idiosyncratic connection between September 11th and Psalm 91:1.²¹ It is important to note that these misreadings are common, and we must be wary lest we fall into the same trap.

Yet the oracle of salvation, spoken with God's voice, in vv. 14-16 does not need to be interpreted in such a fashion. In Jesus' description of the Kingdom of God, there is no singular nationality that dominates others, nor is there a human political structure hellbent on enforcing hierarchies. If read as an address to someone struggling with feelings of helplessness in the face of seemingly overwhelming obstacles, the statement "When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in their distress" offers pastoral care rather than a political will-to-power.

And for some modern readers, such as Max Horkheimer, a twentieth-century German philosopher and sociologist, Psalm 91 functions as a critique of the urge to dominate others. Throughout his life, Horkheimer struggled to understand the powers of oppression and the potential for emancipation, but near the end of his life, he rediscovered the Jewish faith of his youth. His renewed outlook led him to focus on the idea that a "wholly other" world consisting of perfect justice not only existed, but constantly beckoned to become a reality. On his deathbed, Horkheimer wrote a meditation on the power of Psalm 91. Horkheimer remembered that it was his mother's favorite psalm, since she would pray it continually as she struggled to survive under Nazi occupation. As Horkheimer writes, "It was the expression of her certainty of a divine homeland in the face of the misery and the horror in reality....Such confidence prevailed throughout her life in spite of a full consciousness of the disaster on the European horizon."²² Horkheimer realized that the psalm did not excuse his mother as she whistled past the graveyard, ignoring the real dangers of the world, nor did it give her the illusion that trouble would never impinge on her life. Rather, in spite of real danger and true fear, the psalm offered Horkheimer's mother a utopian vision of a world where justice reigns. It offered her the courage to face a world that truly did consist of dangers all around. In his reading of Psalm 91, Horkheimer followed in his mother's footsteps, urging his audience to trust in the Almighty as a means of opposing the injustices that are rife in this world. As Horkheimer writes, "The thought of refuge as it expresses itself in Psalm 91 awakens not merely obedience, but the love for that which is other than the world and which gives meaning to life and the

suffering in it. Despite everything.”²³ Upon his death, Horkheimer had a phrase from Psalm 91:2 (“In you Eternal One, alone I trust”) inscribed upon his gravestone in the Jewish cemetery in Bern, Switzerland, the home to which his family had fled from Nazi Germany. His parents’ gravestone, nearby in the same cemetery, had long since been engraved with the words of Psalm 91:1.

Or in other words: in life and in death, we belong to the LORD.

Notes

1 See Andrea McDowell, “Legal Aspects of Care of the Elderly in Egypt to the End of the New Kingdom,” in *The Care of the Elderly in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Marten Stol and Sven Peter Vleeming (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 199.

2 See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 703-705. See also J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

3 Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 65.

4 Walter Brueggemann, “Kerygma of the Priestly Writers,” *ZAW* 84 (1972): 403.

5 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination, 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 69.

6 This assertion is debated. Various scholars have suggested that the psalm originally functioned as a purification ritual, a general blessing, an oracular promise of military victory given to a king, or thanksgiving for a recovery from illness, while others argue that it represents a temple entrance liturgy, a request for asylum in the temple, an enthronement ceremony or even a song of conversion to Yahwism. Most of these proposed functions do involve a priest addressing an individual in the Jerusalem temple. See overview by Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 428-432.

7 G. Fink, “Stress, Definitions, Mechanisms, and Effects Outlined: Lessons from Anxiety,” in *Stress: Concepts, Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior: Handbook of Stress, Volume 1*, ed. G. Fink (London: Elsevier, 2016), 5.

8 See Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 147-160.

9 See Breed, “Reception of the Psalms”: example of Psalm 91.

10 Thomas J. Kraus, “‘He That Dwelleth In the Help of the Highest’: Septuagint Psalm 90 and the Iconographic Program on Byzantine Armbands,” in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, ed. C. A. Evans and H. D. Zacharias (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 137-47.

11 See David Tuesday Adamo, “Decolonizing Psalm 91 in an African Perspective with Special Reference to the Culture of the Yoruba People of Nigeria,” *OTE* 25 (2012): 9-26; Brennan W. Breed, “The Reception History of the Psalms: The Example of Psalm 91,” in *The Oxford Handbook on the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014), 297-308.

12 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 19.

13 As Patrick Miller writes about the priestly blessing in Numbers 6, “One must not assume that what we have here is some sort of primitive magic... despite the clear signs that blessing in the Old Testament has an effecting power.” Miller, “The Blessing of God,” *Int* 29 (1975): 249.

14 Jamel Khenfer, Elyette Roux, Eric Tafani, Kristin Laurin, “When God’s (Not) Needed: Spotlight on How Belief in Divine Control Influences Goal Commitment,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 70 (2017): 117-123.

15 Echo Wen Wan and Derek D. Rucker, “Confidence and Construal Framing: When Confidence Increases versus Decreases Information Processing,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 39 (2013): 977-992.

16 Celia Martin Chazelle, *The Crucified God in the Carolingian Era: Theology and Art of Christ’s Passion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001), 260.

17 Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 116.

18 Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 430.

19 Artur Weiser, *Psalms*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 611.

20 Breed, “Reception of the Psalms,” 304-308.

21 See Breed, "Reception of the Psalms," 305-306.

22 Max Horkheimer, "Psalm 91," in *Marx, Critical Theory and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice*, trans. M. Ott, ed. W. Goldstein (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 115-120.

23 Horkheimer, "Psalm 91," 119.