# From Whom
# No Secrets Are Hid

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## Introducing the Psalms

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*With thanks to*
*Philip Clary*

# Contents

Chapter 1

# Introduction to the Book of Psalms

*T*he book of Psalms, complex in its formation and pluralistic in its content, is Israel's highly stylized, normative script for dialogical covenantalism, designed for many "reperformances":

- It is *complex in its formation* because the Psalms seem to arise from many variant settings in diverse times, places, and circumstances. The collection of Psalms, moreover, is itself a collection of subcollections, at least some of which were extant before the book itself was formed.
- It is *pluralistic in its content*, reflecting many different sources and advocacies, so a rich diversity of theological voices is offered in it.
- It is *highly stylized* so that there are predictable speech patterns that become, through usage, familiar. These patterns can be identified according to rhetorical genres that reflect characteristic usage. As a result, it appears that certain patterns of speech are intimately and regularly connected to certain kinds of human experience and circumstance. As a consequence, one may, with some imagination, read backward from speech patterns to social contexts.
- It is *designed for reperformance*. Thus the Psalms offer expressions of praise and prayer that have been found, over the generations, to be recurringly poignant and pertinent to the ebb and flow of human life. Generations of Jews and Christians have found the Psalms to be a reliable resource for the articulation of faith, but also for the authentic articulation of life in its complexity. Along with usage in worship, the Psalms have also been reperformed as instruction, as the young have been socialized and inculcated into the life-world of the Psalms that includes both buoyant hope and a summoning ethic that belong to this singing, praying community.
- The book serves *dialogic covenantalism*. The praise and prayer expressed therein assume and affirm that this is a real transaction: there is a God on the other end of the singing and speaking. The two partners, Israel and

> YHWH, are bound in mutual loyalty and obligation, a relationship that refuses both parties autonomy without responsible connection and subservient submission yet without defining self-assertion. Thus the practice of the Psalter protects the community from both religious temptations of negating the reality of God or negating the legitimacy of the life of the community.

## TWO PSALMIC EXTREMITIES

### Gratitude and Praise

We may identify two stylized speech patterns that serve to voice, in the congregation and in the presence of God, the extremities of human experience. Many of these psalms are affirmative expressions of *gratitude* offered as thanks and exuberance and awe offered as *praise*. In these psalms attention is completely ceded over to the wonder of God who is celebrated as the giver of good gifts and the faithful, gracious governor of all reality. These speech-songs constitute a glad affirmation that the center of faithful existence rests, not with human persons or human achievements, but with the God who is known in the normative narrative memory of Israel. Such hymns of praise regularly attest to God's character as in the briefest of the Psalms:

> For great is his steadfast love toward us,
> and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.
> (Ps. 117:2a)

The two characteristics of YHWH celebrated here are "steadfast love" and "faithfulness," two synonyms for YHWH's readiness to honor covenantal commitments to Israel and to the world.

Along with attestation concerning YHWH's character, many hymns celebrate the marvelous "wonders" of YHWH—wonders committed on some specific occasion and those regularly performed by Israel's Lord. Thus, in Ps. 146:3–9, the capacity of YHWH to enact social transformations is contrasted with the "princes" who have no energy or capacity for such transformations. The vista of YHWH's action is as large as creation itself. But the accent of the psalm is YHWH's commitment to the well-being of the socially vulnerable and marginal, which is to say, prisoners, the blind, the bowed down, strangers, orphans, widows, all those who are without conventional social protection. In this characterization of God, the psalm already articulates an ethical summons to God's followers that they, too, are to be engaged with such vulnerable and marginal persons.

One of the richest deposits of such hymns of praise is at the conclusion of the Psalter in Psalms 146–150, in which the particulars of psalmic praise wanes, and the exuberance of praise becomes more vigorous and bold. In Psalm 148, the singers can imagine all creation, all creatures, including sea monsters and creeping things, united in praise of YHWH. By the culmination of the sequence in Psalm 150, there is a total lack of any specificity, and users of the psalm are invited to dissolve in a glad self-surrender that is to be enacted in the most lyrical way imaginable. Such praise is a recognition that the wonder and splendor of this God—known in the history of Israel and in the beauty of creation—pushes beyond our explanatory categories so that there can be only a liturgical, emotive rendering of all creatures before the creator.

The gladness of thanksgiving matches the exuberance of praise, only there is much more specificity in this articulation. Those who are thankful can "count their blessings" and identify the gifts of God. Thus in Psalm 116, the speaker can remember and recount the prayers of petition previously uttered in a circumstance of need (vv. 1–3). The "snares of death" refers to some circumstance in which the speaker was left helpless. But now, after the crisis, the speaker has been "delivered by God" (v. 8) and is restored to "the land of the living," that is, to full bodily well-being and social acceptance (v. 9).

This psalm indicates that the utterance of thanksgiving is done in a liturgical setting in which appropriate liturgical action would have accompanied the utterance. Thus the speaker remembers having pledged an offering to God if delivered and now "pays my vow," a "thanksgiving sacrifice." This is an act of gratitude and at the same time testimony to the congregation that God has indeed performed a wondrous deliverance that runs beyond all categories of self-sufficiency.

## Lament and Complaint

The other primary genre of prayer, at the other emotional extremity, consists in lament and complaint. In these psalms, the speaker petitions YHWH for help in a circumstance of desperate need. Whereas in praise the speaker has gladly *ceded self* over to the wonder of God, in these laments the speaker *claims self*, asserts self amid acute need, and presumes self-legitimacy in expecting God's ready deliverance. Whereas the songs of praise and thanks are dominated by the language of "you," these prayers are dominated by first-person pronouns in which the central subject of preoccupation is not God, but the needy, trusting, demanding "I." Consider, for example, Psalm 77:

I cry aloud,
aloud to God, that he may hear me.
In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.
I think of God, and I moan;
I meditate, and my spirit faints.

(Ps. 77:1–3)

The language in this instance is intimately personal. But the genre of lament and complaint can also include public crises that concern the entire community. This may refer variously to drought, war, or, quintessentially, the destruction of Jerusalem. In Psalm 44, the community employs assaulting rhetoric in addressing God for being abusive and neglectful. In verses 9–14, the language is dominated by an accusatory "you." But the "us" on the receiving end of alleged divine (mis)conduct is the accent point in the psalm. All that matters is what has happened to "us." The rhetoric is against God, accusing God of reneging on promises of fidelity.

### Lament and Praise Together

These two comprehensive genres that reach the emotional extremities of life do not account for all the Psalms. But a very large part of the Psalter is subsumed in these two genres. Thus the poetry that *cedes self* to God and that *claims self* over against God bespeaks the *intensely dialogical quality* of Israel's faith. The hymns by themselves may lead to an excessive abandonment of self in exuberance. The forcefulness of laments by itself may lead to an unhealthy preoccupation with self. It is, however, the give and take of praise and lament, of ceding and claiming, that is variously submissive and demanding that keeps the faith of Israel open and dynamic. Such a faith is quite in contrast both to religion that is rigorously moralistic, on the one hand, or that is narcissistically engaged only with one's own "spirituality," on the other. The Psalms reject and resist that kind of moralism and that kind of narcissism as distorting temptations.

## TWO THEOLOGICAL FOCI

Beyond the two psalmic extremities, two theological foci that run through the Psalter can also be identified, each of which is announced at the beginning of the book.

### Torah Obedience and the Promise of Shalom

In Psalm 1, the accent is on the Torah, the urgency of obedience to Torah as the promise of *shalom* that comes with such obedience. It is clear that this theme reflects the symmetry of the tradition of the book of Deuteronomy, the normative covenantal tradition that is derived from Mt. Sinai. It is the core claim of that tradition that obedience to Torah is a way of life, and disobedience to Torah is a way of death (see, e.g., Deut. 30:15–20). The conclusion of Psalm 1 is an assertion of such a conviction:

> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
> nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
> for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
> but the way of the wicked will perish.
> (Ps. 1:5–6)

The same theme is reflected in the ethical catalogs of Psalms 15, 24, and 112. But it is also assumed in the laments that voice an expectation of an entitlement that is rooted in covenantal obedience. The tradition confirms that the world is ethically guaranteed and reliable, due to God's fidelity. The problem, so evident in the laments, is that lived experience tells otherwise, and so Israel can pray to YHWH in abrasive and demanding ways.

### Jerusalem, David, and the Temple

The second theme is focused on the Jerusalem establishment that hosts both the Davidic dynasty and the temple. Psalm 2 is placed at the outset of the Psalter to express the significance of David and his dynasty for the faith of Israel. This tradition celebrates YHWH's unconditional promise to David. That promise is seen to have failed in Psalm 89, a psalm whose subject is David:

> But now you have spurned and rejected him;
> you are full of wrath against your anointed.
> You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
> you have defiled his crown in the dust.
> . . . . . .
> Lord, where is your steadfast love of old,
> which by your faithfulness you swore to David?
> (Ps. 89:38–39, 49)

In Psalm 132, moreover, the unconditional promise to David (see 2 Sam. 7:11–16) has been subsumed to the conditional promise of Sinai. Now the promise depends on Torah obedience:

> The LORD swore to David a sure oath
> from which he will 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 your throne."
> (Ps. 132:11–12)

It is also possible to see in other "royal psalms" that the Psalter continues to take YHWH's commitment to David seriously, a commitment that eventuates in Jewish and Christian messianism.

This Jerusalem tradition also pertains to the temple, which is the epitome of an ordered world. So we have "Songs of Zion" in the Psalter that celebrate the city of Jerusalem and the temple as the epicenter of cosmic reality. The best known of these Zion songs is Psalm 46, which celebrates the assured presence of God in the city, even in the face of instability and the threat of chaos. The Songs of Ascent in Psalms 120–134, a now distinct subcollection in the Psalter, were perhaps pilgrim songs initially sung by those in religious procession on their way to the temple. These include Psalm 121, which is in the voice of a traveler at risk, and Psalm 122, which speaks of going up "to the house of the LORD." Many of these Psalms bear the residue of actual liturgical practice.

These several hymnic enhancements of Jerusalem are matched and countered by Psalms that reflect on and respond to the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylon in 587 BCE. Thus Psalm 74:4–8 describes in some painful detail the way in which invading forces have violated the temple. Better known is Psalm 137 in which the deportees from Jerusalem are taunted to sing "a song of Zion" in a foreign land. While some might doubt that the phrase "Song of Zion" in Psalm 137 is a technical phrase, it nevertheless most likely refers to a corpus of psalms (46, 48, 76, 84) and others like them that celebrated the temple. Taken together, these Songs of Zion and the laments over the temple and the city dramatize the hold the temple held on Israel's imagination. In Christian usage, moreover, the loss of the temple and the rebuilding of the temple in the Persian period was transposed so that they

became a way of speaking about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (see John 2:18–22).

## THE SHAPE OF THE PSALTER

Finally it may be noted that the Psalter is divided into five distinct "books," each of which culminates with a sweeping doxology. Interpreters presently are considering clues that suggest that these several "books" may have been formed as they are by design so that the sequence of psalms is not random but aims, in itself, to make a theological statement. In such a hypothesis, each psalm is placed strategically to serve the larger whole. The five books are, perhaps, designed as a match for and reflection of the five books of Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy), Israel's most normative literature. Seen in this light, the Psalter is always an echo of that normative tradition. And while Christians are often tempted to overlook the particularity of the Psalms and to transpose them into a more generic spirituality, in fact this psalmic poetry belongs to the particularity of this specific Israelite community of praise and prayer. There can be no doubt that as the church took over the Psalter for its own use in worship and instruction, it has re-read it with reference to the Gospel claims of Jesus of Nazareth.

Taken in largest sweep, the Psalms move from the summons to Torah in Psalm 1 to the doxological self-abandonment of Psalms 146–150. The God who commands Torah is the God who exercises generative sovereignty over all creation. The convergence of urgent summons, candid response, and doxological self-abandonment is altogether appropriate within a covenantal relationship. The Psalter is thus a script for that continuing relationship. And whenever we perform that script, we commit a counter-cultural act, counter to the dominant political, epistemological, and symbolic assumptions of our culture. This thick poetry goes deeply beneath and boldly beyond our usual rationality so that such performance may yield access to the reality of God's own holiness.