PSALMS

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BELIEF

A Theological Commentary on the Bible

GENERAL EDITORS

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Publisher's Note

William C. Placher worked with Amy Plantinga Pauw as a general editor for this series until his untimely death in November 2008. Bill brought great energy and vision to the series and was instrumental in defining and articulating its distinctive approach and in securing theologians to write for it. Bill's own commentary for the series was the last thing he wrote, and Westminster John Knox Press dedicates the entire series to his memory with affection and gratitude.

William C. Placher, LaFollette Distinguished Professor in Humanities at Wabash College, spent thirty-four years as one of Wabash College's most popular teachers. A summa cum laude graduate of Wabash in 1970, he earned his master's degree in philosophy in 1974 and his PhD in 1975, both from Yale University. In 2002 the American Academy of Religion honored him with the Excellence in Teaching Award. Placher was also the author of thirteen books, including *A History of Christian Theology*, *The Triune God*, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, *Jesus the Savior*, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, and *Unapologetic Theology*. He also edited the volume *Essentials of Christian Theology*, which was named as one of 2004's most outstanding books by both *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* magazines.

Series Introduction

Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible is a series from Westminster John Knox Press featuring biblical commentaries written by theologians. The writers of this series share Karl Barth's concern that, insofar as their usefulness to pastors goes, most modern commentaries are "no commentary at all, but merely the first step toward a commentary." Historical-critical approaches to Scripture rule out some readings and commend others, but such methods only begin to help theological reflection and the preaching of the Word. By themselves, they do not convey the powerful sense of God's merciful presence that calls Christians to repentance and praise; they do not bring the church fully forward in the life of discipleship. It is to such tasks that theologians are called.

For several generations, however, professional theologians in North America and Europe have not been writing commentaries on the Christian Scriptures. The specialization of professional disciplines and the expectations of theological academies about the kind of writing that theologians should do, as well as many of the directions in which contemporary theology itself has gone, have contributed to this dearth of theological commentaries. This is a relatively new phenomenon; until the last century or two, the church's great theologians also routinely saw themselves as biblical interpreters. The gap between the fields is a loss for both the church and the discipline of theology itself. By inviting forty contemporary theologians to wrestle deeply with particular texts of Scripture, the editors of this series hope not only to provide new theological resources for the

church but also to encourage all theologians to pay more attention to Scripture and the life of the church in their writings.

We are grateful to the Louisville Institute, which provided funding for a consultation in June 2007. We invited theologians, pastors, and biblical scholars to join us in a conversation about what this series could contribute to the life of the church. The time was provocative, and the results were rich. Much of the series' shape owes to the insights of these skilled and faithful interpreters, who sought to describe a way to write a commentary that served the theological needs of the church and its pastors with relevance, historical accuracy, and theological depth. The passion of these participants guided us in creating this series and lives on in the volumes.

As theologians, the authors will be interested much less in the matters of form, authorship, historical setting, social context, and philology—the very issues that are often of primary concern to critical biblical scholars. Instead, this series' authors will seek to explain the theological importance of the texts for the church today, using biblical scholarship as needed for such explication but without any attempt to cover all of the topics of the usual modern biblical commentary. This thirty-six-volume series will provide passage-by-passage commentary on all the books of the Protestant biblical canon, with more extensive attention given to passages of particular theological significance.

The authors' chief dialogue will be with the church's creeds, practices, and hymns; with the history of faithful interpretation and use of the Scriptures; with the categories and concepts of theology; and with contemporary culture in both "high" and popular forms. Each volume will begin with a discussion of *why* the church needs this book and why we need it *now*, in order to ground all of the commentary in contemporary relevance. Throughout each volume, text boxes will highlight the voices of ancient and modern interpreters from the global communities of faith, and occasional essays will allow deeper reflection on the key theological concepts of these biblical books.

The authors of this commentary series are theologians of the church who embrace a variety of confessional and theological perspectives. The group of authors assembled for this series represents

more diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender than most other commentary series. They approach the larger Christian tradition with a critical respect, seeking to reclaim its riches and at the same time to acknowledge its shortcomings. The authors also aim to make available to readers a wide range of contemporary theological voices from many parts of the world. While it does recover an older genre of writing, this series is not an attempt to retrieve some idealized past. These commentaries have learned from tradition, but they are most importantly commentaries for today. The authors share the conviction that their work will be more contemporary, more faithful, and more radical, to the extent that it is more biblical, honestly wrestling with the texts of the Scriptures.

William C. Placher
Amy Plantinga Pauw

List of Abbreviations

CEB	Common English Bible
IB	Inclusive Bible
KJV	King James Version
LSB	*Lutheran Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (Augsburg Fortress, 2009)
LW	*Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (Concordia; Fortress, 1955–86)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NRSVue	New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition
RCL	Revised Common Lectionary
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SMLMS	Southern Methodist Library Manuscript
TAL	The Annotated Luther series, 6 vols. (Fortress, 2015–24)

Introduction
Why the Psalms? Why Now?

Has any other single biblical book been so widely used across space and time as the Psalter? This collection of 150 poems has been a formative force in shaping Christian theologies and pieties across the millennia and around the globe. Pocket editions of Christian Scripture that print the Psalter as a companion to the New Testament indicate the significance of the psalms for popular piety. New Testament appeals to specific psalms display how Christians have turned to the psalms to understand the character of God. The psalms are intrinsic to what has been revealed about God and the world through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The density and the richness of this sacred collection of poems and prayers are essential to the revelatory character of Scripture. The Psalms resonate with sturdy strands of the canon of the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible.[1] Like the Hebrew Bible's so-called historical books, several psalms recite salvation history. Others are focused on prophetic warnings and promises. Still other psalms extol the beauty of the Torah in ways reminiscent of Leviticus. Calling for justice and denouncing the neglect of the poor and the stranger, many psalms express the frustration and judgment of the Prophets. Lifting up the importance of wisdom, the psalms also denounce human fools and traitors as in the sapiential books. From the vantage point of these sturdy strands of the Psalter, Martin Luther's description of the Psalter as "a little Bible" makes great sense. In 1528 he wrote: "It seems to me that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble to compile a short

1. In this commentary, we use each of these ways to refer to the Christian canon's first testament.

Bible and example book of all Christendom or of all saints, so that whoever could not read the whole Bible would have here almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little booklet."[2]

The Psalms as Lyrical Theology

Orienting Definitions

Lyric, adj.

1. **suitable for singing to the lyre or for being set to music and sung**
2. **a. expressing direct—usu. intense—personal emotion 2.b. Exuberant; Rhapsodic**
3. **of an opera singer**[3]

Lyra: a northern constellation representing the lyre of Orpheus or Mercury (and containing the bright star Vega). Greek myth presents Orpheus as a poet and musician who nearly rescued his wife Eurydice from Hades by charming Pluto and Persephone with his lyre.

What can be added to the vast literature on the Psalms? Every age has produced commentaries on this inexhaustible collection of biblical poetry. How is it possible for Christian churches and spiritual seekers to continue to read, pray, sing, and wrestle with this collection of ancient Jewish texts, without diminishing their permanent significance? These practices have sustained and deepened the faith and life of Jewish and Christian communities for millennia. Music, literature, and the arts have taken the Psalms as sources of inspiration. This commentary proposes to approach the Psalms as forms

Most emphatically the Psalms must be read and sung as poems, as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poetry if they are to be understood; otherwise, we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not.

C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Harcourt, 1986), 3.

2. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Psalter 1528 (1545)," in *The Interpretation of Scripture*, ed. Euan K. Cameron, vol. 6 of TAL, 6:208.
3. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (G. and C. Merriam, 1973): 687.

of "lyrical theology"—prayed and sung language about God with which God is addressed. We treat the psalms as heightened speech in poetry that takes a wide variety of forms. Why the Psalms now? Because the Psalms are a permanent treasured witness to how God and humankind are forever seeking one another. This remains true here and now in our difficult and complicated age.

In one sense this commentary is about poetic interrogations—God, human beings, and the world in mutual confrontation and dialogue. Like Jacob, we struggle with God in these texts in our own time and place. We ask the ancient questions to God but do so now in view of the urgent questions the current world asks of us. God still asks questions of us who continue to live in our present circumstances of suffering and uncertainty. This commentary invites the reader to join in, doing so at the risk of coming away both blessed and limping, like Jacob at the River Jabbok. There can be no responsible Christian theology without asking questions. Theology is indeed the fine art of asking the most revealing questions and living into the consequences!

While scholarly references to other commentaries are cited, our primary aim is to show how the Psalms make their way into the midst of human life, personal and communal. How are the Psalms to be received in our time, given the suffering and perplexities with which we live? These are both pastoral and theological matters. Questions about human suffering, faith, and doubt, good and evil, justice and injustice, and the mystery of God—these are crucial for anyone who wishes to understand the Psalms today. These poetic texts take on our questions in conversation with the long history of human questions.

At the same time, the Psalms continue to interrogate the traditions in which they are 5located. Sometimes the questions are asked by the voice of those who suffer exile and loss. Sometimes the questions are asked on behalf of those facing enemies, fate, and death. Often the questions in these texts are asked by the psalmist's voice of God, as we find in the biblical prophets. These are weary questions, having been asked by generations long before our own: "How long, O Lord?" (Ps. 13:1). There are questions as wounding and fresh as knife cuts. Other questions focus on what to do with our

impulses toward vengeance and hatred, as in the infamous ending of Psalm 137. Still others go deeply into our innermost struggles, uncovering our mixed religious and moral motivations: "See if there be any wicked way in me" (Ps. 139:24). Many are simply cries in the night: "Help, save, pity and defend us!"—a concluding pattern we learn from petitionary prayer.[4] So much ebb and flow, always under the constant command to "praise God" no matter what. In the end, the Psalms may cause us to wonder how we can learn why, and when, to sing "Hallelujah" as in Psalms 146–150.

It is impossible to comprehend the book of Psalms in a single commentary. There is no unified, single theology expressed in the whole collection as we have it. This is because our received text contains psalms from a vast historical period in Israel's history in the Near East.[5] Indeed, the Psalter is a "collection of collections," forged in different times and contexts stretching over thousands of years.[6] The process of composing and compiling the collections was proceeded by a long period of oral transmission. It is possible to distinguish images of the divine belonging to various periods of Israel's history. We will note examples between pre- and postexilic psalms, but our task is not to offer a definitive historical critical account. Biblical scholarship has developed several subdisciplines concerned with social/historical, archeological, linguistic, and cultural approaches. All these approaches are valuable for theological reflection. Many will find their way into our Further Reflections. These Further Reflections are listed in the table of contents where subtitles indicate their thematic focus.

The canonical five books (Psalms 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, and 107–150) provide an overall structure to the Psalms.[7] Theological and contextual differences that mark various collections are traditionally identified by the superscriptions that appear at the top of many psalms. Thus, we speak of the Davidic (3–41, 51–71,

4. "Proper Liturgy for Good Friday," *The Book of Common Prayer* (Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), 282.
5. We recognize the troubled connotations of this geographic reference. We use it because it is a well-known designation for our audience.
6. For a succinct, insightful account of the heterogeneous collections within the present Psalter, see William Brown's chapter 5, "Psalms as Collections and Clusters," in *Psalms* (Abingdon, 2010), 85–107.
7. See pp. 27–30, "Further Reflections: The Psalter's Five-Book Design."

108–110, 138–145); the Korahite (42–49, 84–85, 87–88); and the Asaphite (50, 73–83) collections. Many psalms that appear across the canonical books bear common themes with various theological accents such as those named Elohistic (42–83) or Enthronement hymns (47, 93, 95–99) or Songs of Ascents (120–134), and finally, the Halleluiah Psalms (111–118, 146–150).[8]

In several respects this "theological commentary" harkens to earlier approaches to interpreting the Scriptures. Commentaries by theologians such as Origen, Augustine, Hildegard of Bingen, Luther, Calvin, and others, while providing foundations for modern scholarship, focus on the spiritual, theological, and liturgical understandings of the psalms. Here we focus especially on questions the psalms pose for us today. The whole book of Psalms contains nearly all the major biblical themes of Scripture. Thus, we pay attention to various tensions in the images of God in the poetry of creation, covenant, sin, judgment, and messianic hope. These theological motifs are treated from a Christian history of reception and practice of the psalms. We write primarily for a Christian audience while generally avoiding a singular christological framework of interpretation.

When considering the Psalter's relevance for contemporary life, we should bear in mind three major characteristics encountered in the psalms. First, the Psalter's lyrics pulsate with great rhythms of lament and praise. Second, the psalms are both mirror and lamp for biblical faith in tradition and reception. Finally, the music of the psalms includes both the singing and musical settings as well as the musicality of the text's diverse poetry. These three characteristics figure prominently in this commentary. Together they demonstrate why the psalms are "lyrical theology" for both past and present.

The Lamentable and the Praiseworthy: A Deep Rhythm

Saint Augustine observed that Hope has two daughters: Anger and Courage. Anger speaks the truth about the unjust and the wicked, and Courage sings hope amid suffering and even despair. But anger and rage without the courage to praise the praiseworthy also

8. See pp. 214–15, "Further Reflections: Songs of Ascent(s), Pilgrims, and Refugees."

become self-consuming. We may "rage against the machine" but forget the beauty of the image in which we are created and overlook the covenant God has made with creation and human history. There is a profound difference between road rage and righteous indignation. Rage is triggered like a flash and excludes reasoning about the situation. Rage is born of accumulated hurt and self-pity. Righteous indignation may be keenly "felt," but it involves knowing something about moral complexity. What counts as fairness or justice is part of the emotional appraisal of the situation. Sudden rage and the drive toward vengeance may be a sign of vitality, but anger without the sense of what would restore life is destructive. We learn this distinction also from the "otherness" of the Psalms, as, for example, in Psalm 109.

The profound rhythm of the Psalms between doxology and lament is also the rhythm of human life, both as individuals and as communities. The praise of God occupies a crucial place in this commentary because it is the theological grounding life of faith in covenant with the God of Israel and of all creation. Yet God is experienced always between "the Pit and the Wing."[9] This feature of the Psalter points to a theological claim beyond the surface of our language about God. If human beings are created in God's image, then we also stand in solidarity with the voices in the Psalms who cry out of the depths against injustice, oppression, and idolatry, while admitting that we exist and live only "under the shelter of divine wings" (Ps. 91).

Speaking the lamentable, however, is, for many Christians, a difficult truth-telling. There is much lament denial in popular culture in the United States (and thus in popular theology). This is especially apparent in many forms of contemporary church music that have lost anchorage in the lament psalms. Given a choice, a vast majority of religious communities prefer upbeat music of praise and thanksgiving to the deep diving into sorrow and complicity. As though we could pretend that the world is perfectly fine as it is! "God's in God's heaven, and all is right with the world" as in Robert

9. This is a recurring image in Walter Brueggemann's writing. See his *Praying the Psalms*, 2nd ed. (Cascade, 2007), 41. Cf. also Brueggemann's *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Fortress, 1988).

Browning's optimistic line. But this is precisely what theologian Johannes Metz has called the "eulogistic evasion of what really matters."[10] When doxology becomes self-serving and exclusive, the prayer and proclamation of the Christian church become culturally captive. When doxology is used to cover over rather than to face our complicities, it easily subverts the praise of God. However, just at this point, prophetic song and the power of lament is born. Immediately one might think of the prophet Amos: "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:23–24).

At the very time when the news is saturated by human lies, carnage, enmity, and suffering, many of our liturgies avoid or simply neglect the lament psalms. This is not merely found in churches or in religious communities. Whole cultures can live in lament denial, using the language of Zion presumptively, or uttering the language of love without justice.

Biblical scholar Brent Strawn has written that "it is both wonder and scandal that the modern church in the West has largely lost touch with the Psalter. . . . The reason for such neglect, articulated by Claus Westermann, is related to the very reason the psalms should be taken seriously, namely that they are direct speech about a realistic faith that traffics in the extremities of human life and experience."[11] When we consider images and stories of human pain and suffering ingested daily from news and social media, it is a wonder how human beings can live so easily with such reality. It may be that many have become so accustomed to the persistence of such images and narratives that we are dulled to the moral offense and spiritual consequences. This is related to what philosopher Hannah Arendt calls the "banality of evil."[12] Images and stories of human poverty and pain demonically become part of the endless "entertainment" that our present culture craves. Do we swim daily in such an ocean that we do not have time to conceive, let alone ask, the theological questions carried

10. See Johannes Metz and Karl Rahner, *The Courage to Pray* (Crossroads, 1981), 20.
11. Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship* (Eerdmans, 2009), xv–xvi.
12. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Viking, 1963).

in the tides? When human beings lose our sense of critique and protest, something essential is lost. Human ethical sensibility and theological vision are mutually diminished. Lament denial is both a social/cultural and a religious loss. Common humanity is at stake in the rhythm of lament and doxology in the Psalter.

Yet, for all the seeming familiarity of the human emotions found in the psalms, there is also a strangeness. We recognize our contemporary behaviors and emotional outbursts—our personal depressions and our consolations—in many of the familiar psalms. Psalm 23's "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (KJV) or "in the darkest valley" (NRSV and CEB) speaks to personal occasions of grief or fear. Yet the deeper rhythms in the psalms are also *not* ours. For examples, the fate of the Davidic kingdom (Ps. 89), the continual concerns with purity and righteousness, or the episodic calls for vengeance against Israel's enemies (Ps. 35) often do not align with contemporary sensibilities in the United States. It is easy to project our present ideas and images of what the Bible says onto a select set of verses. When our first instinct is to regard the psalms as a library of comfort and consolation, the rhythm of the Psalter and the use of the psalms to vent unreflective rage may disappoint and even confound us when our contemporary American cultural assumptions are not met. The psalms are consistently and persistently realistic about human limitations and our favored illusions of piety. Nevertheless, we must continually reenter the world of the lamentable and the praiseworthy if we are to take the difficult truths of biblical faith seriously. The difficult questions are in the rhythms of the texts and in human life itself, for both Christians and Jews.

Still, personal and social sorrow and grief do continue, whether we gather in churches, synagogues, or other public places. The disconnect between human social grieving and the complexity of biblical poetry remains. Even funeral liturgies can fail to invite shared anger and lament over loss. At times our prayer needs to be taught, as Brian Wren has it, "an honest, aching song."[13] The streets of Ferguson, Charleston, Minneapolis, Denver, Uvalde, Jerusalem, or Gaza become outdoor liturgies. In some Christian traditions,

13. Brian Wren, "When Pain and Terror Strike by Chance" (Hope Publishing, 1983).

lament psalms may not appear at all, certainly not as regular congregational sung prayer. But the Black church and many in the Pentecostal tradition are at home in explicit lament. In other Christian settings anguished inner struggles with suffering and injustice may be happening in privatized personal lives, but shared protest and the resource of communal solidarity in speaking the truth to God is neglected. For all this, the inverse problem may be called "lament and guilt overload." Suppressed lament and restricted freedom for exuberant joy result from an unrelieved preoccupation with the lamentable. This, too, is a distortion of the deep rhythms of lament and doxology in the Psalter.

To pray the psalms over time is crucial to the life of faith in God. Only by such disciplined practice can we see that doxology must continually check against idolatry, and lament continually check against presumption and indifference. Invoking this rhythm is central to reading, meditating, praying, and singing the psalms in our time and circumstances. Coming to terms with the lamentable and the praiseworthy is essential to meditating on the whole Psalter. This way we come to wise insight repeatedly in particular sequences of psalms as in Psalms 35, 36, and 37, in which we hear shifting attitudes toward the "wicked."

The psalms of lament and release echo in the background in contemporary poets as well. Consider Jack Gilbert's biting poem, "A Brief for the Defense:"

> If babies are
> not starving someplace, they are starving somewhere else.
> . . . . . .
> But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.[14]

Perhaps the most well-known psalm that merges lament and the cry for vengeance is Psalm 137, "by the rivers of Babylon." Later in this commentary we address the prayed theology of this difficult psalm.[15] For now, the point is this: lament itself comes in many forms and opens upon many human struggles—from anger to trust,

14. Jack Gilbert's "A Brief for the Defense" in *Refusing Heaven* (Knopf, 2005).
15. See pp. 120–22, "Further Reflections: Vengeance and Violence in the Psalms."

from anguish to healing. The rhythm of lament and praise is the very rhythm of human communities and of human persons.

There is no reason to avoid the power and discomfort of biblical lament. The psalms carry the power to name and to touch the profound reality of human struggle to make sense of our world. Only by truth-telling about calamity and suffering can we experience the fundamental reality of faith as trust in divine mercy. Only by speaking truthfully of the depths (Ps. 130) out of which we cry can we begin to fathom the Psalter's insistence on praise and thanksgiving for the wisdom and work of God.

How can we pray these psalms without entering the room of truth before God?

Psalms as Mirror and Lamp

Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and a host of contemporary theologians, especially liberation theologians, have pointed out that the Psalms mirror our humanity back to us. Athanasius, in the early fourth century, wrote, "It seems to me, moreover, that because the Psalms thus served him who sings them as a mirror, wherein he sees himself and his own soul, he cannot help but render them in such a manner that their words go home with equal force to those who hear him sing, and stir them also to a like reaction."[16] He compares them to a "mirror" where we humans see ourselves as we are, and yet also as we ought to be. The long history of praying the Psalms in worship and in devotion is revelatory of our humanity. We can say that the Psalter is a book of theological anthropology. This is far more than an academic claim. The anthropology of the Psalms is essential truth in view of the whole of human history. Put pastorally, psalms ask many questions of us: Who are we? Why do we tell lies? Why do we do things that destroy? Why do we deny God's will? We see ourselves as both created in the image of God (Ps. 8) but also as rebellious sinners (all the penitential psalms: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). At the same time, we are subject to God's mercy and grace

16. Athanasius, "The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms," Appendix to *St Athanasius on the Incarnation* (St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, 1953), 105.

(Pss. 90 and 103). The Psalms are a paradoxical mirror. We see the truth and wonder whence our help shall come (Ps. 121). Will God save us from ourselves?

For many whose primary experience of the Psalms is personal devotion, many psalms portray our inner struggles with psychological and social aspects of our lives. Our intentions and motives are laid bare, and much that is hidden from us emerges. This appears in many hymns and songs based on images from the Psalms, from "Amazing Grace" to "When in Our Music God Is Glorified" and in the hymn "By Gracious Powers" based on a poem of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.[17] Stated theologically, the Psalms disclose our human psyche as the site of struggle. Many psalms portray our ambivalent response to the divine invitation to truth and righteousness. Our "wickedness" is seen in personal and social complicities, the "grace" in our submission to love and justice. In many psalms and hymns we hear a deep echo to the prophet Micah's "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8).

At the same time, the Psalms are also a lamp, illuminating the search for wisdom. From the outset in Psalm 1, we are called to meditate on God's word (Torah). Psalms 1, 19, and 119 mark this explicit pattern. Yet embedded in laments we find a search for God's wisdom. To face the truth about us and common humanity cries out for an answer. How shall we live a faithful life? The illuminating power of God's judgments is a recurring theme. "Thy Word," a well-known twentieth-century song made popular by Amy Grant, is based on Psalm 119:105. The great wisdom in Psalm 119 echoes themes from biblical wisdom literature. Many psalms have been classified as "Torah psalms" (e.g., 1, 19, 32, 34, 37, 49, 73, 112, and 119), which have a more didactic character. These psalms contain instructions on how we should live in accordance with God's will for the world. In contrast to the wicked, the faithful people of God are called to seek the divine will and way for humankind. Fulfilling the law is the pathway of life and righteousness. Surprisingly, when we reach the culmination of praise and doxology that concludes the

17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "New Year (1945) in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Fontana Books, 1959), 174; trans. by Fred Pratt Green as the hymn text, "By Gracious Powers" in 1972.

whole Psalter, the whole of human life in the whole of creation is imaged as the ultimate fulfillment of Torah.

When, in the New Testament, Jesus is said to have fulfilled the law and the prophets, the divine illumination is available to all who confess faith in Christ. We encounter judgment and critical self-reflection in praying and singing these texts. This is because they mirror God's steadfast instruction and grace as well as hold up a mirror to our own finitude and flaws. But Christians have always gone to the Psalms to find encouragement, a sense of sin and repentance, and to discern God's word for how we are to live.

In the common liturgical life of Christians, the accent falls on the communal reception of the mirror and lamp offered by the Psalms. Together we come to see ourselves in communities that are marked by threat and promise. We also receive guidance for the journey our communities are summoned to undertake. The mirror and the lamp guide our feet and illuminate how we are to be fully alive.

The Music of the Psalms

The Psalms are meant for singing. The music is explicitly contained in many psalms, as in Psalm 100:1, "make a joyful noise to the LORD." Often believers are called upon to sing a new song, as in Psalms 96 and 98. This directs our attention to the musicality of the psalms. The poetic quality in the language of the psalms already bears musical elements: pitch, tone, rhythm. In this sense, a good reading and any common performance of the psalms is already "musical."

But the history of the psalms and their impact on faith communities have been set to music, from chant to hymn to instrumental.[18] The book of Psalms thus is a vast musical and poetic collaboration accumulating over time. Written, edited, and performed over successive generations in various contexts, this biblical songbook forms faith and expresses religious experience. Just as in performing any music and poetry, we come to add our own voices. This singing and praying does not simply repeat the notes or read the words. Instead

18. See pp. 239–45, "Sounding the Psalms Musically: Un-concluding Reflections."

we are brought to engage shared emotions surrounding human life and death, our suffering and confusion, our laments and praises.

When we speak of the "performance" of the psalms, differing musical settings always play a crucial role in interpretation and understanding. Musical setting is a crucial aspect of the meaning of the text—whether in varying chant forms, hymnic settings, or in the long history of musical paraphrasing. We note especially the revolution with Isaac Watts and earlier, the profound hymn paraphrases of Martin Luther, and earlier still, the inclusion of psalm materials in third- and fourth-century hymns (Ambrose of Milan and others). Even earlier still, ancient Israelites composed and performed musical versions of psalms and treasured them through their oral tradition.[19]

The flow of images in Psalms 42–43 is itself a musical feature of the poetry. However, explicit musical settings such as found in many hymnals accent and foreground quite different levels of meaning in the text of these psalms. Sometimes "the yearning" or desire is highlighted while the lament is diminished. The difficult question "where is your God?" is not sounded by this setting, whereas in a chant form that question has equal weight to the opening image of the deer and the water brooks. This demonstrates not only the significance of chant form but how specific musical settings are themselves interpretations of a psalm's meaning. We return to this crucial theological point in "Sounding the Psalms: Un-Concluding Reflections," this commentary's closing coda.

How the Psalms Now? Some Notes about Approach

In this section of our introduction, we describe significant features of our mutual and separate approaches to this theological commentary. We discuss standard commentary topics that have influenced our approach to the Psalter. We also discuss decisions we have made concerning how to use the Further Reflections and textboxes that are distinctive features of the Belief commentary series. We include

19. See pp. 64–70, "Further Reflections: Feminist Biblical Scholarship on the Psalms" for further discussion of practices in ancient Israel relating to the psalms.

ecclesial and cultural contexts, scholarly discussions, and personal experiences that have shaped our engagement with the Psalter and its individual psalms.

A key feature of the commentary genre is reading the Psalms one by one. Sometimes the unit is a chapter; at other times it is a single verse. Our Psalms commentary follows this traditional *ad seriatim* method. Individual psalms tend to be the literary unit under discussion while occasionally the unit is a larger collection of several psalms. Our approach also is shaped by the Psalter's traditional arrangement as five sequential books.[20] At times psalms seem repetitive; at other times, they create tensions and conflicts with one another. Many psalms are set in places tied to the themes explored by the psalms adjacent to them. They thereby offer a point of departure for both insight and puzzlement. At other times, psalms offer an explanation or an expansion, augmenting the point and theme under discussion.

Second, the textbox feature of this commentary series brings together a wide range of voices, across time and space, culture and vocation. Textboxes will feature theologians and biblical scholars. But you also will hear from poets and musicians. Akin to the psalms themselves, some of them speak with pathos; a few of them offer humor. They all offer insight that could find itself into sermons and essays.

Short essays, entitled "Further Reflections," are sprinkled across the commentary. This genre has provided chances to dwell more deeply with topics, asking questions and making proposals. Some topics are sparked by biblical scholarship; others are prompted by matters of theology and Christian piety. Wherever they began, each now lives at the intersection of question and understanding. While their placement in this volume has been deliberate, many could have been set somewhere else. The contents shows their assigned places. Footnotes also are used to alert readers to places of confluence and interaction.

We have learned much from discussions of the forms and genres of particular psalms. We also have been instructed by newer approaches developed in psalm scholarship: canonical criticism, literary and rhetorical approaches and reception history, as well as feminist and

20. See pp. 27–30, "The Psalter's Five-Book Design."

womanist methods, global and anticolonial approaches, and other contextual and liberation methods. Nevertheless, we approach the Psalter as Christian theologians, reading the psalms for the life and witness of Christians and their communities. We write even for those who no longer interact with churches or may never have done so. Yet nothing substitutes for the actual praying and singing of psalms in community.

Each of us has been nurtured by communities of faith and practice, including time spent in monastic communities. This commentary has been shaped by praying and singing the psalms in several Christian traditions, both in public worship and in personal devotion. The spiritual practice of *lectio divina* (prayerful reading and meditation) forms a significant framework for the authors. At the same time, we have been formed by the ways the psalms have been interpreted by theologians, poets, and musicians, both past and present.

The Belief series is a series of commentaries on biblical books written by Christian theologians. Because this particular volume is coauthored, we make clear our individual approaches to Christian theology.

Kristen Kvam is a laywoman in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) whose scholarship and teaching often stand at confluences marked by Scripture, doctrine, feminist theory, and ecumenical and interreligious conversations. Active in the Workgroup on Constructive Theology for a decade, she agrees that constructive theologians "accept the reality of Christianity's complicity in the history of human suffering and believe that telling the truth about it will lead us to deeper understanding, better answers, and a more interesting faith."[21] Kris wrote on Luther's "Preface to the Psalms" and his "Consolation for Women Whose Pregnancies Have Not Gone Well" for volumes in TAL. Together with Linda Schearing (Gonzaga) and Valarie Ziegler (DePauw), Kris coedited *Eve and Adam: An Anthology of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*. Currently serving on a bilateral dialogue between the ELCA and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), her ecumenical work has included an appointment to the international bilateral between the

21. The Workgroup on Constructive Theology, *Awake to the Moment: An Introduction to Theology*, ed. Laurel C. Schneider and Stephen G. Ray Jr. (Westminster John Knox, 2016), 8.

Vatican and Lutheran World Federation, contributing to the volumes *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation* and *The Apostolicity of the Church*. She is Professor of Theology at Saint Paul School of Theology in greater Kansas City and Oklahoma City.

Don Saliers is an ordained United Methodist clergyperson who has served rural and urban congregations. He was involved in producing liturgical resources for the United Methodist Church. A trained musician and a student of philosophy and theology, he brings to this project strong interests in poetry and aesthetics. A trained keyboard performer, he has deep roots in classical, jazz, and world music. He has been an organist and choir director in multiple contexts including university chapels. As a composer and arranger, his corpus includes several compositions of the psalms. For eight years, Don was national chaplain of the American Guild of Organists. His writings include *Music and Theology, The Soul in Paraphrase*, and *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine*.[22] His philosophical studies include theories of emotion with special interest in Søren Kierkegaard and Ludwig Wittgenstein. He is William R. Cannon Professor Emeritus of Theology and Worship at Emory University.

We bring several differences in perspective to this project. Our commitment to listening to the Psalter together for ways it speaks to church and world today converges in this work. Listening to the Psalter and the long history of all who have sung it has forged an ecumenical collaboration. New insights are discovered as strong memories are reclaimed.

No theological commentary is worth its salt unless its readers engage in the reception and exploration of the scriptural text. We have described some of the experiences that mark our engagement. We hope these descriptions invite you to engage your experience in the study, meditation, and exploration of the psalms. We urge you to bring your reflective life as well as your community's life to the psalms. Who knows what will emerge if you take the psalms and these approaches seriously? The rediscovery of the psalms lies in wait for you and your communities.

22. *Music and Theology* (Abingdon, 2007); *The Soul in Paraphrase: Prayer and the Religious Affections*, 2nd ed. (OSL Publications, 1991); *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Abingdon, 1994).

Plunging In: Questions the Psalms Ask

Questions are at the heart of all five canonical books of the Psalms. We begin with a list, showing how the psalmists never tire of asking and pondering a vast range of questions. While we look to the psalms for consolation, encouragement, and praise, these questions lead us to the heart of biblical faith—questions at once theological and existential. So, we begin by listing the Psalter's explicit questions.

Ps. 2:1 "Why do the nations conspire ["rage" KJV] and the peoples plot in vain?"

4:2 "How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?"

6:3 "My soul is also struck with terror, while you, O LORD—how long?"

6:5 "In Sheol who can give you praise?"

8:4 "What are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

10:1 "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (cf. Isa. 45:15)

13:1–2 "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"

15:1 "O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?"

22:1 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?"

24:3 "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?"

24:8 "Who is the King of glory?"

27:1 "Whom shall I fear?"

30:9	"What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?"
34:12	"Which of you desires life and covets many days to enjoy good?"
35:17	"How long, O LORD, will you look on?"
39:7	"And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?"
42:5; 43:5	"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?"
42:9	"Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"
42:10	(Adversaries ask) "Where is your God?"
43:2	"Why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?"
44:23	"Why do you sleep, O Lord?"
44:24	"Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?"
49:5–6	"Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me, those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches?"
50:13	(God asks) "Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?"
50:16	(God asks) "What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?"
56:4	"In God I trust; I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?" (Also 56:11: "What can a mere mortal do to me?")
58:1	"Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods [mighty lords]? Do you judge people fairly?"
59:7	(The wicked ask) "'Who,' they think, 'will hear us?'"
Cf. 64:5–6	(Evildoers ask) "Who can see us? Who can search out our crimes?"
60:9–10	"Who will bring me to the fortified city? Who will lead me to Edom? Have you not rejected us, O God?"

74:1 "O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?"

74:10–11 "How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand; why do you keep your hand in your bosom?"

77:7–9 "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"

79:5 "How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?"

79:10 "Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'"

80:4 "O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?"

80:12 "Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?"

82:2 (God asks) "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?"

85:5–6 "Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?"

88:10–12 "Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? Is your steadfast love [*hesed*] declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?"

88:14 "O LORD, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?"

89:46 "How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?"

89:48 "Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol?"

89:49	"Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?"
90:13	"Turn, O Lord! How long?"
94:8–10	"Understand, O dullest of the people; fools, when will you be wise? He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see? He who disciplines the nations, he who teaches knowledge to humankind, does he not chastise?"
94:16	"Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers?"
94:20	"Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who contrive mischief by statute?"
101:2	"I will study the way that is blameless. When shall I attain it?"
108:10–11	"Who will bring me to the fortified city? Who will lead me to Edom? Have you not rejected us, O God?"
115:2	"Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'"
119:82	"When will you comfort me?"
119:84	"How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me?"
120:3	"What shall be given to you? And what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?"
121:1	"From where will my help come?"
130:3	"If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?"
137:4	"How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?"
139:7	"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?"
144:3	"O LORD, what are human beings that you regard them, or mortals that you think of them?" (cf. Ps. 8:4)
147:17	"He hurls down hail like crumbs—who can stand before his cold?"

FIRST FURTHER REFLECTION
Psalms as Questions

The Psalms are punctuated with how those who first wrote the psalms expressed their most basic concerns. Here we have a portrait of how the whole book of Psalms is a form of interrogation, both of humanity and of God. These many poetic texts contain an ongoing dialogue of question and answer or question and silence of interrogation and mystery. What is at stake for us today in reflection and meditation? Why? Who? What? How? What theological significance can be drawn from this study? To answer these questions, we must continue to sing, pray, preach, and ponder what the psalms demand. The psalms never tire of asking questions. These explicit questions uncover the way in which many psalmists over a long period of time express their most fundamental theological and existential concerns. These questions force us to reflect on what we actually believe and how we are to live. This gives us a portrait of how the whole Psalter is a form of interrogation of both humankind and God. The Psalter contains an ongoing dialogue of question and answer and of question and silence. What is at stake for those who pray and sing these psalms in our present world?

A close examination reveals that many of the Psalms make *implicit* claims about God, humanity, and the whole creation by virtue of the questions asked. Without doubt, the Psalms are a form of interrogating human life—our daily practices, our imagination of God, our ethics, and what lies beneath Israel's remembered experience. Psalm 22 addresses God with one of the most profound questions in all of the Bible and in Christian worship: "Why have you forsaken me?" In the psalms, we confront the fact that God is questioned. The disturbing thing is that God permits this and listens to human beings. This question of abandonment, uttered by Jesus from the cross, remains a shock to all secure forms of Christian piety. The force of it has shaped a mature Christology through the generations who meditate on the "crucified God," found in recent theologians as diverse as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jürgen Moltmann.

Many psalms ask directly, "Where are you, God?" God's very existence may seem at stake, but the immediate issue is often about

divine saving presence and action. Psalm 10 begins "Why . . . do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (v. 1). Psalm 13:1 cries out, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" These questions echo throughout the whole Psalter, even as praise and thanksgiving are offered. Often the questioning of God is placed in the taunts of the enemies of faith, as in Psalms 42–43. Adversaries often ask sarcastically, "Where is your God?" (42:3, 10), or "Where is their God?" (Ps. 115:2). In praying the Psalms, religious belief and faithful trust are vulnerable to such questioning. The difficult and inconvenient truth is that many psalms intentionally *resist* pious clichés and easy answers.

But questions are also put to human beings. Psalm 2 famously opens with the question: "Why do the nations conspire? (or "rage" as the KJV has it). The tumultuous history of Israel itself seems to be a question. Certainly, in every period of warring and fractious political history, God raises this question. The very opening of the Psalter leads off with an acknowledgment of warfare and human conflict. Human arrangements of power are urgent issues for prayer. Sometimes the question is placed in a divine speech, as in Psalm 4:2: "How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?" Sometimes the question is about who is faithful or worthy to be in the presence of God. This is the opening question of Psalm 15: "Who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" The answer follows immediately in vv. 2–5: those who speak the truth, who do no evil, do not take bribes, and who oppose the wicked. Questions about human wickedness and sin thus reveal what qualities of life are demanded and honored by the divine will. Could it be that in offering questions like these the Psalter is actually a little "catechism"?

Many psalms ask questions that are answered in the text, as in Psalm 15. Two classical examples are found in Psalms 24 and 27. In Psalm 24 it is about human worthiness: "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? Who shall stand in his holy place?" (v. 3). The psalmist replies, "Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, . . . who do not swear deceitfully" In the very praying of the psalm we are instructed that our question has an answer. In the case of Psalm 27, the questions are about our own state of mind in the face of evil and

evildoers: "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" (v. 1). Our question is answered with the affirmation of God who shelters us. But the question does not stop there; it continues to echo throughout the psalm. The plea to God remains: "Do not hide your face from me. . . . Do not cast me off" (vv. 9–10). This is what makes Psalm 27 both powerful and perennial. We never cease asking, while continually being amazed that God is our strength. The depth of these "answers" is their continuing relevance. The questions must always be asked, and the answers heard and interpreted for each succeeding age and circumstance. In that way the answers are inexhaustible over time and circumstance.

At other times we glimpse how praise of God is linked with honest questions, as in Psalm 30. Here the psalmist asks, "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit?" Verse 9 intensifies by asking, "Will the dust praise you?" There is more than a hint of desperation here, yet that psalm ends with the affirmation that human beings will not be silent. Praise and thanks will be forever. The answer is a resolute yes, though never with an easy explanation of how this is so after death. This may remind some of Charles Wesley's eucharistic hymn phrase: "Sure and real is the grace, the manner be unknown."[23]

Among the most interesting examples are questions put to those who hide from or who oppose God. So, in Psalm 58:1, there is a touch of sarcasm in "Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods [mighty lords]? Do you judge people fairly?" The sharp reply is immediate: "No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth" (v. 2). Once again, the questions carry the force of truth, not as doctrine but as confrontation and dialogue. When God puts questions to the wicked, often those who consider themselves righteous may be the first to be convicted. Psalm 94 describes the arrogant speech of the wicked and complaints that they "kill the widow and the stranger; they murder the orphan" (vv. 4–7). All the while they say that God does not see us. Then the questions follow: "When will you be wise? He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see? (vv. 8–9). This

23. "O the Depth of Love Divine" (1745), stanza 4, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), #627.

is part of our prayer to the "God of vengeance," arising from seeing the wicked exult in their own deeds and obliviousness. How often must we ask, "Who rises up . . . against the wicked . . . the evildoers?" (94:16). Psalm 94 vents our deep need to imagine God's vengeance on behalf of the victims and the innocent. God is affirmed as our refuge and stronghold. At the same time, we sense that these questions will return in the continuing story of human self-deception and resistance to the divine will for humankind.

In this way the questions arise from within theological convictions and from all the ambiguities of human history. To affirm that God is steadfast in the face of our complicities, double-mindedness, and in the face of evil is itself a source of ongoing questions. We may pray in the surprise ending of Psalm 139 that God should do away with the wicked, only to ask, "See if there is any wicked way in me" (v. 24). Psalm 30 asks, "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you?" (v. 9). The tone of sincere wonderment is part of the question itself. Even though this psalm ends with the joyous recognition that God has turned "my mourning into dancing . . . and clothed me with joy" in verse 11, the question retains its force. This is a feature of reporting questions that appear to be answered. The classical penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) exhibit this vulnerability before God. The confessing of sins comes forth from our sense of lack. And, even though confessed, we in some sense realize that we will need to confess sins again in the future as well.

Psalm 35 expresses questions to God in the course of a prayer for deliverance from enemies: "How long, O Lord, will you look on? Rescue me. . . ." (v. 17). The vehement plea for vindication intensifies the question until vindication culminates in a confident release into joy when rescue comes and the psalmist breaks into praise of the divine righteousness (v. 28). Sometimes the questions are actually forms of assurance, as in Psalm 39:7: "And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you."

Questions in Psalms 42 and 43 are found on the tongue of those opposing God, who ask continually, "Where is your God?" (42:10). The psalmist insistently asks a self-reflexive question: "Why are you cast down, O my soul . . . why are you disquieted within me? (42:11;

43:5) In this sense the psalms call for what contemporary life calls "psychological introspection." But this is clearly not a matter of self-suggestion. It is a calling into being of meditation in the presence of God (*in conspectu Dei*). The answer is a grace-given self-admonition: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him" (43:5).

Throughout the psalms God asks the rhetorical question, as in Psalm 50: "Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" (v. 13). Here the tone is ironic when read in light of animal sacrifice. God challenges human religious practices that contain superstition and magic. But this example aims also at our tendencies to project inadequate human images onto the divine. As though the explicit questions are not enough, often the descriptions of the "enemies" in the psalms implicitly demand questions of us. Descriptions that disturb us may carry the force of the basic question: Why pray the psalms at all? Yet the rhythm continues—complaint, lament, confession—all contain an elemental force of request, of asking God, of seeking. Here we may recall Anselm's poignant opening prayer in his *Proslogion*: "Reveal Thyself to me."[24] This is deeply written in the mystery of a mature christological praying of the Psalms. What is it to pray all the psalms with Christ? Does Christ constantly pray the psalms for us? How does the narrative of his life, suffering, death and resurrection alter our understanding of the Psalms as his intercession for the world? How does this intensify all the questions we have reviewed in the texts of the Hebrew psalms?

There is one sense in which new questions will always continually emerge in the praying and meditating upon the psalms. Human beings always ask in the face of our present experience of suffering, doubt, and joy. In the past century we have faced disastrous wars, pestilence, constant exile and migration, political oppression, exploitation of the natural, and vast shifts in our understanding of religion and ethics. The questions that haunt us seem to belong to our present history. Yet the explicit questions we find in the Psalms are shockingly the same when seen from the standpoint of biblical faith. The interrogative character of the Psalms is for times like ours but also for all times of human perplexity. This raises a fundamental

24. Anselm, *Proslogion*, I, https://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20000630_anselmo_en.html.

question: *Is authentic faith in God possible without raising such questions?* One of the great challenges of the book of Psalms to the Christian faith is how to live maturely with the questions. Taking the whole emotional range of prayer and song in the Psalter will inevitably challenge easy piety. We should not be surprised when questions in the psalms should disorient us. This is the force of Walter Brueggemann's forceful framing of the pattern in the whole Psalter: the constant movement between orientation through disorientation to new orientation.[25] Such a framework does not leave us only with questions; it opens us to the actual way in which God is invested in human history and our own struggling existence.

Does the life expressed in the psalms end with a question mark? The whole Psalter answers with the very Hebrew name of the Psalms—*Tehillim*, "praise." But any who dare pray the psalms over time with Israel in temple (and synagogue) and over all the life of Christianity's struggle in life and prayer know that the Hallelujahs are held together with the questions. Saints, martyrs, and God-seekers raise the questions and in so doing, like the psalmists, deepen the praise of God. Could it be that in pleading so many of these questions we hear the wisdom of God?

25. See Walter Brueggemann's *Spirituality of the Psalms* where these concepts are chapter titles (Fortress, 2002).

Book I
Psalms 1–41

FURTHER REFLECTIONS
The Psalter's Five-Book Design

The Psalter's configuration as five books is easy to overlook. In most English versions of the Bible, these books carry no titles, at least not in ways we ordinarily expect titles to be rendered. Instead, we get a skimpy numeric heading and the numbers for psalms found in that specific book. Thus, in the NRSVue, the phrase "Book I" sits atop of Psalm 1, followed by a parenthetical (Psalms 1–41). "Book II" similarly sits atop Psalm 42, followed by "Psalms 42–72" set within parentheses. The same is true for Book III (Psalms 73–89), Book IV (Psalms 90–106), and Book V (Psalms 107–150). These sparse headings are one sign we are given of an ancient practice of dividing the Psalter into five distinct but related books.

Another sign of the five-book design is seen at the end of the first four books. Each of them has a final verse or set of verses that concludes its final psalm. These closing verses offer a doxology of blessing and praise and use the word "Amen," providing a marker of praise dividing one book from another. For example, Psalm 41:13's "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen" not only ends Psalm 41 but also functions to close Book I. The closing for Book II is longer but similarly themed. Psalm 72:18–19 states: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen." Then, in what some call an "editorial note," 72:20 states,

"The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended."[1] The doxology set between Books III and IV concludes with Ps. 89:52's short "Blessed be the LORD forever. Amen and Amen." The doxology between Book IV and V at 106:48 proclaims, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. And let all the people say, 'Amen.' Praise the LORD!"

How might we regard the practice of dividing the Psalter into five books? Comparative readings of the five books show ways they express differing theological accents with different nuances. For example, while lament occurs across all five books, it has a stronger role in the first books than the last ones. Complaints and petitions diminish in frequency as thanksgiving and praise swell in proportion.

What might this subtle change in tone signify theologically? On the one hand, it encourages readings that observe "praise" as a theme that crescendos across the Psalter. Yet, since Book V contains lament psalms, even if not as many lament psalms as earlier books, we also are invited to notice that praise never silences lament. Instead, praise recognizes and incorporates lament even as it resounds in thanksgiving. This can be a significant theological point for shaping the pieties of persons and communities because it offers a sense of the complexity of the religious life. Religious life need not be understood as offering no space for painful disturbances, the moanings of suffering, and pointed questions for God. Like the Psalter itself, the life of faith is shaped by joy but also by lament.

Shifts in the referent for the term "king" is another distinctive theological point among the books. Psalm scholars note that early books tend to use this title mostly for David and occasionally for other human rulers. Later books, in contrast, present God as the Ruler who occupies the throne. Observing this change in referent for "king" from a human person to the Divine Sovereign creates awareness of how the Psalter reinterprets the nature of monarchy. Changes in historical context are in the background of this change in referent. Once Israel's monarchy had been devastated by the Babylonian exile, references to human royalty lost their significance.

1. See *LSB*, 927. Psalm scholar Rolf A. Jacobson wrote the Introduction and Study Notes for the *LSB*'s the Psalms.

Thus, reassigning the terms to God became practical as well as theologically appropriate. Furthermore, learning about this change allows and even encourages contemporary readers and pray-ers to pay attention to where in the psalter they are when they encounter the language of monarchs and royalty.

Contemporary psalm scholarship has opened a way to see a story or a narrative reaching across the books of the Psalter.[2] In the twentieth century's last quarter, psalm scholars began to discern a story about the history of the people of Israel being told by the five-book design. These scholars observed distinctive patterns in the themes and pieties presented in each book. Psalm scholar Nancy deClaissé-Walford offers this synopsis of the narrative:

> It begins in Book I with the story of the reign of King David. Solomon's reign is recounted in Book II. Book III tells the story of the divided kingdoms and their eventual destructions by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Book IV relates the struggle of the exiles in Babylon to find identity and meaning in a world of changed circumstance. Book V celebrates the return to Jerusalem and the establishment of a new Israel with God as sovereign.[3]

The Psalter's narrative arc reaches its nadir with the crises described in Book III and Psalm 89's piercing pleas, including verse 46's "How Long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?" Books IV and V offer responses to the crises. Book IV responds by stressing that God is sovereign; Book V's response emphasizes that the Sovereign One's acts of deliverance elicit praise and thanksgiving by the people but also by all creation.

One significance of this narrative reading of the five-book design for Christians is that it reminds Christians of the "mighty acts" and experiences of God across the sweep of the history of the people of ancient Israel. The psalms and their books can be read without attending to this storied design. Yet acquiring a sense for how the

2. In the fourth century CE, Gregory of Nyssa also saw the five-book design telling a story. The plot of the story he identified, however, concerned a progressive growth in the virtues across five stages of a person's spiritual life. See Ronald E. Heine's Introduction, Translation and Notes to *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms* (Clarendon, 1995).
3. Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, "The Meta-Narrative of the Psalter," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford University Press, 2014), 368.

sequence of books can function to tell this grand story about God and the Jewish people also can shape Christian immersion in the Psalter. This is crucial because the history of the Jewish people is the history into which Jesus of Nazareth was born, taught, and lived. Through Jesus Christ's life, death, and rising again, Christians have been adopted into this history. This complex history is known as our own through Jesus the Christ, and yet not our own without Christ Jesus.

Attending to the five-book design of the Psalter encourages theological reflection on the work of contemporary Psalm scholars. This scholarship offers several maps for reading the psalms in light of their historical and literary contexts. Paying attention to where a psalm is placed within the Psalter in relation to such maps assists us in praying the psalms in connection to the subtle and nuanced mappings of time that were sketched into the Psalter's five-book design. Clearly the Psalter can be prayed and read without attending to the bird's eye perspectives of these maps. Psalm scholarship, however, offers significant ways to deepen and extend our reading and praying when those using the Psalter pay attention to distinctive textures of the Psalter's five Books. This significance is why this Further Reflection has been placed at the onset of this *ad seriatim* commentary of the Psalter.

Psalms 1 and 2

The first two psalms are like gates that open the temple of the Psalter in its final form. The first psalm sets forth a stark contrast between two ways of being human: the way of righteousness and of wickedness. Two ways of life are set in strong contrast at the very beginning of the Psalter: blessing and curse. The one way of life is fruitful, imaged as "trees planted by streams of water." The other, unable to withstand divine judgment, is like "chaff that the wind drives away." In our present world of ambiguity and shifting shadings of moral judgment, such a contrast seems too simple, too certain of such differences. In the moral and political world of gray, isn't this simply too

naive? Or is it? We must look beyond these opening psalms into the Psalter's complex patterns of intertextuality to answer this question.

This bold contrast is made even more pointed because the psalmist claims that God will sustain the righteous and punish the wicked. This is not the voice of calculated human reason; this is not the voice of politics. It is the voice of faith, which knows full well that the "nations conspire" (Ps. 2:1) and that rulers of the earth oppose God's sovereignty. This is the psalmist's lyrical voice and a Word (torah) (cf. Pss. 19 and 119) that counters standard human ways of thinking and feeling. To meditate upon and delight in God's Word (the torah of the psalms and prophets) sets up a sharp contrast between how the world operates and how God desires it to be. The Lord knows both "the way of the righteous" and the "way of the wicked." God sees the truth that we humans cannot see on our own. The whole Psalter, as we shall see, is saturated by the huge gap between the world we humans make and claims about the world that God intends. This gap between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be drives the psalms at every turn.

The opening pair of psalms plunges us into the permanent tensions of biblical faith. In our day we still ask, Why do the wicked seem to flourish? This question runs like a red thread through the many lament and complaint psalms to follow. Equally important, the first psalm establishes a moral and ethical world over which God has dominion. Surprisingly, these opening psalms are not full of praise; they are more like an ordering constitution of a covenant world. Praising the God of covenant and wisdom unfolds slowly, culminating in the great doxological conclusion (Pss. 146–150) of the whole collection. With this opening we can no longer oppose prayer and piety to the ethical demands of God's Word. Prayer and ethics are bound together in the way of life the Torah commands.

Psalm 2 takes us well beyond worries about wicked individuals. Political and social power are named here. The psalmist addresses rulers and nations who conspire against God's covenant Word. A warning is issued—divine anger is kindled against wicked kings. If Psalm 1 focuses on God's moral order and the human choices in life, Psalm 2 focuses on God's power and promise to the ones God favors. God cares for those who come to "take refuge" in the divine

Word. Human beings who remain faithful inherit the earth, now released from despotic and wicked hands. For the Christian praying this psalm, the language evokes the one chosen who will be the judge over the nations, God's Word embodied in human form. The first two verses of Psalm 2 are cited in Acts 4:25–26 in the prayer of Peter and John witnessing to Jesus as the anointed one.[4] If we should initially find in the psalms too much talk about the "wicked" and the "righteous," we need to take an honest assessment of ways in which rulers of nations are capable of astonishing cruelty and oppression. Why do nations rage against one another? Why the unending story of war? When in this century will we see a world without human enmity and bloodshed? We reread Psalms 1 and 2 after we also cry out with Psalm 13, "How long, O LORD?," or simply when we ponder the daily news: genocide, human trafficking, death of the innocent, slavery still, and violence to women in homes and on our streets. How can those who have political and military power kill innocent civilians in the blink of an eye? Our world has been exposed to slaughter covered over by deception. We cannot plead innocence. Psalms 1 and 2 are far more realistic about the world than we first think. It makes sense to ask God to discern if there be any "wicked way" in us, as with the penitential psalms: "see if there is any wicked way in me" (Ps. 139:24). Despite all this, the first and last accent is on blessedness: "Happy are all who take refuge in him" (Ps. 2:11). These opening psalms affirm a way of blessedness in the midst of a difficult world.

For the Christian community, Psalm 2 is used at strategic points in the New Testament to point to God's Messiah. Psalm 1 counsels wisdom, and Psalm 2 anticipates a true "king"—a sovereign who will break the rule of human tyrannies and who will be God's anointed one to save the earth. This psalm also appears in a compressed form (Ps. 2:1, 5) in Revelation 11:18 in the scene of the twenty-four elders worshiping God. In referring to those sharing in the messianic rule of Christ in Revelation 2:26–27, again the psalm is cited (Ps. 2:8–9). The book of Acts depicts Paul appealing to Psalm 2:7 as prophesying a theological claim about God's promise being fulfilled in Jesus: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you" (Acts 13:33), which the Letter to the Hebrews duplicates two times at 1:5 and 5:5.

4. Also see pp. 201–5, "Further Reflections: Messianic Uses of Psalms in the New Testament."

> **In the first century, [the Son of God] could mean [several things]. . . . Jewish works closer to Jesus' time use the term to speak of particularly righteous people, of martyrs for their faith, and of people who could work healings. . . . Whatever "Son of God" had meant in earlier contexts, it now [after Nicaea] meant not a created object, but one who is given birth from God's own substance. . . . Even before God's love for the world, there is eternally a mutual love and conversation within God.**
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> William C. Placher, *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 30, 32.

These uses of Psalm 2 indicate how seriously the New Testament authors regarded these songs and poems as instruction and prophecy. The psalms, along with the prophet Isaiah, are the most quoted Hebrew Scripture in the New Testament literature. It is the task of Christian preaching to respect both the integrity of the whole psalm as Hebrew scriptural poetry and to do justice to the impact of the Psalter on Christian theological claims. The ancient hope for the Messiah is a river of expectation in the Psalter. Lamentation to God presses the expectation that God will hear the cries of the earth and will act to save the faithful. If Jesus is the one who suffers and shares in those laments in his weeping over Jerusalem and his prophetic call for justice, then many of the psalms can be sung and prayed by Christians as his messianic voice. This is why the great Hallel Psalms 113–118, for example, are also Easter psalms.

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