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Reading and Hearing the Psalms: The Gut of the Bible



by Calvin Seerveld

Since this conference encourages us to be living in Scripture, we should start by doing it, by standing and reading out loud together Psalm 115.

The text is antiphonal, back-and-forth between liturgist and people, a call and response primed to help you realize you are not alone but in a communion of *tsadiqim*, *chasideim*, saints. And together by reading Scripture in faith we invoke God's presence, testify to whatever hope be in us, make our urgent requests known to God, and then wait to hear the LORD's blessing.

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PSALM 115 [for communal responsive reading aloud]

- leader:* Not for us, LORD, not for us, 1
but do something glorious for Your name!
Make something solid and shining to show
Your covenanting Grace and utterly
dependable faithfulness!
- Why should the peoples all around say, 2
“And where now is their God”?
- people:* Our God is in heaven! 3
Everything that pleases God, God completes!
- leader:* Their “gods” are solid gold and silver, 4
[but] made by a human hand.
Their fake gods have a mouth
but cannot speak; 5
they have eyes but cannot see!
Ears they have but cannot hear; 6
a nose is there, but they cannot smell —
Their hands cannot touch things. 7
Their feet cannot go for a walk.
No sound passes through their throat . . .
- people:* Like them become those who made them! 8
Like them become all those who feel
secure with them.
- leader:* Israel! get to feel secure 9
with the LORD God:
- people:* a relief and a protection is the LORD
for such people.
- leader:* [Priestly] house of Aaron! bind yourselves
only to the LORD God: 10
- people:* a relief and a protection is the LORD
for such people.

leader: You [newcomers] who fear Yahweh! trust –
 trust the LORD God: 11
people: a relief and protection is God for such people.
leader: The LORD God has kept us in mind:
 God shall bless – 12
people: Bless the house of Israel!
 Bless the [priestly] house of Aaron!
 Bless those who fear the LORD God! 13
leader: –the unimportant ones together
 with the very important ones....
 May the LORD God prosper you,
 you and your children. 14
 May you all be blessed by the LORD God, 15
 who made heaven and earth.
 Heaven [you know] belongs specially
 to the LORD: 16
 The earth is what God gave for the sons
 and daughters of man [to tend].
 Dead men and women do not praise the LORD, 17
 not one of those who have gone down
 to where it is deathly still.
 But we people here, let us praise the LORD! 18
 from now on and for ever more:
people: thank God – hallelujah!

(translation 1969)

Scripture is a live wire. You need to take hold of it and be charged by its power. The script has to become oral: you have to hear the voice of God speaking for reading the Bible to be right.

Naturally, it is important to pick up subliminally on imaginative features of a psalm text. For example, that a repeated line is not a copyist's error. Repetition in poetry--whether it be Robert Frost's "And miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep," or Bertolt Brecht's refrain in "Das Lied des Freudenmädchens," or God's word of Psalm 115, "... a relief and a protection is the LORD for such people"--repetition brings amplification, intensification, a purposeful supply of extra meaning that counts in between the literal lines.

It's also good to catch a sense of setting, if possible. The initial two verses of Psalm 115 sound as if God's chosen people are in difficult straits and want the LORD's *chesed* (Covenantal grace) and *'emet* (dependable Faithfulness) to kick into gear, because

the surrounding nations' jibe is, "Isn't your Almighty God going to show up?" Psalm 115 fits well if you lived at the time of Nehemiah, surrounded by enemies, rebuilding the blasted wall of Jerusalem, crying together as a people because the second temple being put up looks like an outhouse compared to the one Solomon had built: "Not for us, LORD, not for us, but do something glorious for Your name!" Psalm 115 contends with God precisely the way Moses did in Exodus 32, and argues for what Ezekiel 36.22-32 reports God-self says God shall do: restore Israel to their home in order to vindicate God's holy name. So Psalm 115 has

The psalms are not loose bits and pieces.

the tenor of being written perhaps after the Jews returned from exile in the 500s B.C.

A good time for the Church to have read Psalm 115 would have been when the Romans were putting the squeeze on Christians calling only Jesus Christ *kurios*, Lord, and demanding that they call Emperor Augustus *kurios*, Caesar, lord, or the congregation would be martyred.

Are Dordt's rising graduates under siege? Beset by idols? Are a group of you seniors coming back from spiritual exile? so it would be appropriate to declaim Psalm 115 at the graduation ceremonies this coming May, or not? At least you can see how difficult it might be to have Psalm 115—this communal, responsive, shouting piece of God's Word written—come into its own. And you do justice to God's Word written if you merely read it silently in a private "quiet time" before you fall asleep?

My presuppositions

Before we go any further, I should be open about my presuppositions, and where we are headed in "Reading and Hearing the Psalms: The Gut of the Bible." Even if you don't share my perspective, I'd like to make a couple of psalms meaningful to you, God willing, and freshen our language for talking with God.

Credo (I believe) this holy scripture in its canonic form is God-speaking literature given us historically, booked in the human language of Egyptian-

educated Moses (Acts 7.20-22), philosopher-poet Isaiah, medical doctor Luke (Colossians 4.14, Luke 1.1-4), converted Pharisee bachelor Paul (II Thessalonians 3.17), and many other gifted, colorful anonymous men and women over a millennium of years, for our learning by faith the one true story of *magnalia Dei* (God's great deeds) and the LORD's Rule coming in this world which belongs to God revealed in Jesus Christ. *Credo* the Bible is mysteriously kerygmatic: the very text understood pulsates with God's voice existentially, and compels one to respond with, "Amen! Lord, speak to me more, I'm listening," or "God loves sinners into repentance?—preposterous!"

That is, God's Word written, in front of us, in its full-orbed counsel, is meant to be heard (said Buber), accepted as it is. Studied, sure, to catch the deep resonances of subtle meaning embedded in the text from Genesis to Revelation, but the Bible must be studied on your knees, so to speak, so you don't start pretending to hover over the text and try to master it, pick out its fleas, flaws, or even proof texts to argue for this or that special partisan point you want to make. You are not supposed to get the Bible's message in your theologistic grip: the Bible is supposed to get you, change you, turn you around, discipline-disciple you, give you direction on pivotal matters like life or death, truth or the lie, and face you with the Way of shalom or vanity, wisdom or foolishness.

If you meet the living God in reading holy Scripture, then other good things can happen too, like a Holy Spirited way of life, fashioning a biblically Christian worldview, sound churchly doctrine, responsible societal reformation and missionary endeavor. The key thing is to submit your reading, in the communion of saints living and dead, to the given writing as a trustworthy, imaginative, historical record of God-speaking-to-us awaiting our discovery.

So, from the standpoint of this Calvinian Reformational reflective faith tradition, I should like to explore with you how we humans are to go about reading the biblical psalms with supple maturity (sensitivity, intelligence, imaginativity, competence). We need to hear God's Word sound through the marvelous crisscrossing cathedral variety of 150 pieces that cohere as a single, edited book of the whole Bible—aware that both Older and Newer

Testaments assume the Psalter to be integral to the whole Bible and quote it cross-referentially in profusion.

The psalms as an edited book

For me, the psalms in the biblical canon are not loose bits and pieces, free-form devotional lyrics, or approved mantras for TM. The psalms as we have them are songs ascribed variously to pop-song writer David, to King David's poet-laureate Asaph and the composers-singers who bore that family name (#50,73-83). Certain psalms were written down, the text says, by the temple guild of liturgical leaders named Qorah (#42-49,84-85,87-88), and many are available to us through the God-breathed writing (cf. II Timothy 3.16-17) of nameless, skilled wise men and women artists.

A fact that has not received enough attention until of late is that God's Spirit had certain persons—nobody knows who, exactly when, or why—edit at different times(?) all these 150 songs into five books (see *Table A*). The last verse of the first four books (41.13, 72.18-19, 89.52, 106.48) quotes in abbreviated form a doxology found in I Chronicles 16.34-36—that's the chapter which reports on the time when David organized the first musicians' union to write songs and become professional composers and musicians for the worship services among God's people:

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel.
from everlasting on for ever and evermore.
Amen and Amen!

Book V ends with a flurry of five hallelujah! songs (#146-150). It seems that a jubilant doxology is a good way to end any size collection of songs intended specifically to address the LORD God.

Psalms 72.20 adds onto its doxology: "Here end the intercessory prayers of David, son of Jesse," as if books I and II had formed an earlier completed psalter (because other psalms scattered through books III, IV, and V are credited by somebody to David's pedigree too!). And one can find that Psalms 120-134 all have the same title, "A song for the goings-up," and thus comprise, following Psalm 119, a small collection of 15 psalms inside book V, apparently tailored for singing on pilgrimages up to Jerusalem, if not used on the actual return from Babylonian and disparate exiles.²

There are other editorial notes beside the attribution of composers; for example, what sort of piece the psalm is (*Table B*): Is it text for a song-chant (*shir*)? Should it be accompanied by instruments (*mizmor*)? Is it an intercessory prayer (*tephilah*), a meditative poem (*maskil*), or an exultant celebrative shout (*hallelujah*)! All these notes provide clues to the psalms. There are also occasionally fascinating historiographic glosses: Psalm 3, "when David was fleeing from his son Absalom" (cf. II Samuel 15-17); Psalm 34, "when David made-believe he was crazy in front of [Philistine king] Achish-Abimelech in order to make his get-away" (cf. I Samuel 21.10-15).

Did you realize there are duplicate psalms? Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 are exactly the same, except Psalm 14 has the "Yahweh" name and Psalm 53 has only "Elohim" to name God. Psalm 40.13-17 is Psalm 70 precisely, again only with the "Yahweh" and "Elohim" name difference. If you live in Scripture, start to spend quality time there, become familiar with the book of psalms as a definite book of the Bible, you start to notice things.

Instead of becoming skeptical about "What in the world is going on here?" one needs to remember that serious Jewish authorities and ancient Church councils were somehow prayerfully led by God's Spirit to receive as "sacred" what we know as the canon. The edited Psalter we have, along with these credits, superscriptions, and musical designations, was set and accepted already earlier than the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew text into the Greek language, c. 270 B.C., because some of the musical terms were so old the Alexandrian Greek translators didn't know what the Hebrew meant: "David's tune of Psalm 8, the choir director is told, should be played according to Giffith." Who knows what that means? (It's probably like saying a certain blues tune, before the oral tradition became literate, should be played in the Memphis style, not the Chicago blues way.)

The incredible diversity of the psalm writings which came out of historically specific, artistically honed, lived faith experiences, are still all of one piece because God's Holy Spirit permeates the texts. II Peter 1.20-21 puts the nature of the Psalter right:

First of all you (should) know this: no declaration of Scripture comes to be from a private

interpretation; no (scripted) utterance was ever brought about by the will of a man or a woman; but humans led by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

So the Psalms first of all have God talking...in David's troubled cries (#22) or Asaph's meditative history (#78). The broken-hearted as well as joyful psalms tell me about God, about who God is, how the LORD does things with God's creatures, what God says to us humans. Faithful readers of the psalms will distill from the human wrestlings with God found in the psalms what God's nuanced will is for our lives today, since basically the psalms are God talking. That's why, as the Belgic Confession

*Psalms 1 and 2 are the
orienting horizons to
the book of the psalms.*

of my communion puts it (article 5): "...we believe without a doubt all things contained in [the canonical psalms]."

If we take seriously now the editing of the 150 psalms into one book, then it makes good sense to expect the first two untitled psalms,³ not even called songs, to have been set there like a preface or foreword to give you a prospectus of what follows in the book. What happens if one takes that tack? Psalm 1 centers around *torah*, and Psalm 2 introduces Messiah. Those are the orienting horizons, I think, to the book of the psalms: God's will which when followed satisfies, and the LORD's anointed one here and coming.

Orienting first psalm: the LORD's *torah*

Let me read the quieting, matter-of-faith first psalm of the book:

PSALM 1

That man or woman is a happy one	1
who does not practice the clever thought habits of godless people,	
who does not go stand around the way sinners do,	
or sit down with mocking, scoffing company.	

[That man or woman is a happy one] whose pastime rather is the <i>torah</i> of the LORD,	2
--	---

who ruminates on the *torah* of the LORD
day and night.

That person is like a tree transplanted
near running waters. 3
a tree which bears its fruit on time
and whose leaf does not wither –
all that man or woman does is prospered!

It is not so with godless people. 4
They are like chaff which the wind blows to bits.
That is why godless people 5
–the sinners within the covenantal
congregation too–
that is why they cannot and shall not
withstand Judgment:
[they are like chaff which the wind blows to bits.]

The LORD God keeps close watch on the
way-of-life the tried-and-true faithful lead: 6
the way the wicked walk, however, shall end
in permanent destruction.

(translation 1966/1999)

The first psalm begins with a beatitude: Happy/blessed is the person who loves to spend time with the LORD's *torah*, who simply enjoys sitting down with God and marveling, pondering, rechewing the cud of the LORD God's magnificent ordering of the heavens and earth, the intricate ordinances the LORD has put in place for fulfilling human lives, for ruling nations of people and sorting out the complexities of myriad societal relationships. *Torah* for Israel included also the special treatment the LORD had given them in forging the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, the great deeds of deliverance from Egyptian captivity, the ten Words God-self had even written in stone for Moses on Mount Sinai: remembering all that *torah* (the LORD's worldwide guidance), a person engrossed with God's *torah*, says the first psalm, is like a tree transplanted near running waters; so you never dry up, but bear fruit on time.

Unfortunately god-less people—the smart operators who have no truck with boundaries, who are blind to the fact that God's *torah* covenanting is a protective embrace creatures can rest within; intelligent, godless hot-shots—are not rooted, they have no source of living water, they're just blowin' in the wind, blowing to bits in fact. But the LORD

God takes intimate loving care of the *tsadiqim*, the tried-and-true faithful ones who walk the way of *torah*-life, bearing good mature fruit.

Torah has this cosmic, historical-redemptive scope, I dare say, because Psalm 19 backs up Psalm 1 as to the life-giving nature of *torah* (Psalm 19:7)⁴ and keeps the cosmic ordinances that govern the bridegroom sun's daily rising and setting (vv. 1-6) unified together with the testimonies, statutes, commands and tasks the LORD prompts us humans to follow if we would produce what is good (vv. 7-11). God's "law" (*torah*) is a many splendoured reality.

The long 22-stanza alphabetic acrostic Psalm 119 also emphasizes the variegated richness of the LORD's *torah* by using 8 to 10 different near synonyms of *torah* (see *Table C*) in each line of every eight line stanza. It's as if the psalmist is serenading the wonders of the LORD's *torah* on an 8-10 stringed lyre, playing variations on the Word of God, the speaking/willing/doing of the Covenantal LORD God toward all creatures, especially toward Israel as God's own special folk.

Psalm 78.1 begins, "Open your ears, my people, to my *torah*!" and then Psalm 78 recounts the story of God's patient, punishing, forgiving, directing, leading of God's pigheaded people circuitously wandering through the wilderness toward the Promised Land and David's royal rule—that's *torah* in action!

Buber carefully translates *torah* as *Weisung* (guidance), like *Wegweisung* (leading, directing the way to go) [related to *Unterweisung* (teaching)]. The crux of what we need to hear about *torah* from Psalms 1, 19, 119, 78 and many others is that *torah* is the actual guiding hand of the living God Almighty, as close as the snow and change of seasons (Psalm 148.3-10) and as revealing of the LORD God's everlasting compassion as God's constantly providing time for both wicked and sinful godly people to be afoot in this marvelous world.

***Torah* as God's intimate love letter**

It is so important to catch the tone of intimacy in the first psalm about *torah* in order to understand the book of psalms as the very gut of the Bible. *Torah* is the LORD God's graciously extended hand to steady us on our feet like a child learning to walk. *Torah* holds the congealed passion and

jealous love of God for the life of us creatures: God doesn't want us dead! So the LORD spoke, speaks, in the orderly *glossolia* of mountains, trees and animals; in the birth of a child and the face of a neighbor, in leading God's folk through ages of persecuted weakness; and in the trustworthy scripted Word we know as the Bible, which gives focus to our vision and hearing on which way to walk—that all is *torah*. And the first psalm presents this beginning simple good news: if you would truly stay alive, bear good fruit, on time, get close to *torah*, the Word of God, and discover the way the LORD expects things to be, and you will be blessed with shalom. Wicked, perverse humans miss the boat.

And this direction is proffered by the first psalm with the same gentle, inviting firmness God shows in covenanting with Moses, as reported in Deuteronomy 30.11-20:

Do you see, I have set right in front of you today genuine life and what's good, or death and what's perverse....choose life so that you and your children's children may live, loving the LORD your God, responding to God's voice, cleaving to the Lord (cf. Genesis 2:24!)....

Psalm 1 faces us readers with the same decision Proverbs 9 pictures with the two attractive women asking a young, inexperienced boy to come in and dine. One says,

"Come, eat the meal with me; drink the wine I have all mixed.

Let your one-track simplemindedness go so that you may live and walk the way of insight."

And the other woman says,

"Stolen waters are sweet.

And a meal of secretly hidden (delicacies) tastes so delicious...."

But the poor fellow doesn't know, comments the text, that the last house for dinner is full of dead men.

Jesus, too, includes in his "Beatitudes" this counsel: "You cannot serve both God and Mammon....so first of all search out the Rule of God, God's way of doing right, and then [the cornucopia of blessings] will be given you in addition" (Matthew 6.24,33).

Don't ever let anybody mislead you into thinking God's *torah* is God's big stick to knock you back into line, or a legislated set of rules to make your hellbent yen for the open road miserable. That misconception of "law" is exactly what infiltrated the intertestamentary writings on wisdom (which is not

imported into the canon⁵), and became the program of crowd-control used by the scribal leadership of God's people: the "law of God" as a repressive measure that you have to obey and do what's right to the letter, if you want to be saved. But that's a frame-up! God is not an autocratic, mean-spirited parent with inflexible rules, and is not interested in punitive damages (cf. John 3:17).

Jesus said it clearly: "Don't you people suppose I came to abolish the law and the prophets. I didn't come to overthrow but to carry out (God's *torah*)! ...However, if your 'right-doing' does not top the correct deeds of the scribes and Pharisees, you all

*A person engrossed
with God's torah is
like a tree transplanted
near running waters.*

shall never walk into the Rule of heaven" (Matthew 5.17,20). And Paul struggled years with the Jewish work-righteous legalists in Corinth, Rome, and Galatia, who had twisted the LORD's "child-leading" *torah* (cf. *paidagogos*, Galatians 3.23-4.7) into a pseudo-mediator detached from the speaking mouth of God: Paul argued that the dilemma of either "keep the law intact" or "enjoy an antinomial freedom of the spirit" is false. God's grace (*chesed*) was given us in Christ for us to grow up, to mature into disciplined, winsome members of the Holy Spirited body of the Christ (Ephesians 4.7,12-16).

Psalm 1 talks about the Judgment (*mishpat*) coming, but introduces an amazing thought—so characteristic of the psalms that follow—did you catch it in v. 5b (which I translated as a clause between dashes)? God does not require "the righteous" (*tsadiqim*, the covenantal congregation) to be sinless! We know that's true, personally, as well as because David was a major biblical psalm writer. But remember that truth as introduction to the psalm book: God does not blink at there being sinners among "the righteous"; God simply wants to transplant them near the LORD's *torah* so they won't fail to withstand what's coming for the wicked.

Psalm 1 says the world we inhabit is like a burning bush where God is speaking; so take off your shoes, you grown-ups, and walk barefoot like an exploring child through God's world. Psalm 1 also shows that the psalms are God's love letter to you (Jeremiah 17.5-10 replays Psalm 1). A person thrives on reading a love letter someone has written to him or her.

**Orienting second psalm:
the LORD's anointed one(s)**

The other introductory piece to this edited book, Psalm 2, in tandem with the meditative Psalm 1, has a quite different vigor, and immediately gets down to historical brass tacks of political struggle and the LORD's provision for anointing public leaders to rule in God's name. Envision a chorus of voices: a wise person; a priest (whom God used to anoint leaders in Israel); and then a king, royalty, an "anointed one" whom God addresses as "my son." [Be ready to stand up before we speak our benediction].⁶

PSALM 2 (for choral reading in a worship service)

The wise cantor

Why do the peoples of the world rage about
[like madmen] 1
Why in the world do the different nations
keep on thinking up stupid schemes?
Earth kings get together "for a consultation" – 2
important rulers hold conferences all together
against the LORD God and
against God's anointed one (*mashiach*).
[These earthly rulers say:]
"Let us smash the chains of this God 3
that hold us down!
Let us throw off the reins of God's 'anointed one'!"

Another liturgete, perhaps a priest

The One who sits enthroned in heaven 4
begins to laugh,
my Lord mimics their foolish bluster;
and then God turns to them in (holy) anger, 5
stops the upstarts short with God's fierce outrage:
"It was I! it is I who have set up my anointed king 6
on Zion, my set-apart mountain."

Princely ruler taking official part in the liturgy

Yes, I will recite the decisive appointment 7
by the LORD God.

God said to me:

"You are my son. Today is the day I have borne you.
Ask it of me and I will give you peoples
of the world for your heritage; 8
the most distant nations of the earth
will be yours to tend.
You may have to break them with a rod of iron. 9
You may have to smash them for remolding
as a sculpting potter reshapes her clay dish--"

Wise cantor again

So now, you (small-time little) rulers.
you had better wise up! 10
You who (only) judge on the earth,
hadn't you better get the point?
Serve the LORD God with an attentive awe – 11
Take joy (in your task only) with trembling –
Give homage to this (adopted) son (of God too) –
lest he also get worked up, and you obliterate
any way [for you to walk],
for God's anger can flash up like lightning. . . .

Congregated chorus

Blessed are all those who have run 12
to take shelter with the anointed one.

(translation, 1980/1999)

While Psalm 1 situates us in the cosmic theatre of God's *torah*, Psalm 2 pulls us into the thick of public life where earthly rulers challenge God's and mock those whom the LORD has consecrated, installed as holy men and women (v. 6) to bring about a rule of God's compassionate justice. Even when you are called upon to smash an evil setup (v. 9), you break it in pieces like a potter who wants to reclaim the clay to build a new, good vessel. The antagonism (the "antithesis") comes only from those who dream up schemes to oppose God's redemptive way in the world (v. 3).

In reading the second psalm, it is critical that we hear it as describing the real world: *Mesiah* (the Messiah, anointed one) is not something esoteric, mythical, or foreign to our usual experience. In Israel they ceremoniously poured sweet-smelling oil over Aaron's head, letting it drip off his robes, to consecrate him ritually as high priest of the nation, signing and sealing him off from impurity, as it were, so he could mediate the people's sins by overseeing their atoning sacrifices (Leviticus 8-9, Psalm 133).

Saul, David, and Solomon were anointed with oil by prophet-priests to be kings in Israel (I Samuel 10.1-8, I Samuel 16.1-13, I Kings 1). That was God's way of showing what Nathan told David God said verbally about Solomon, "I will be to him as father, and he will be to me as son" (II Samuel 7.1-17). I adopt you, says God to the anointed one, and shall protect you from the power-grabbers in the world, and teach you to lay down your life so that the weak, like widows and orphaned children, shall receive reliable relief from your royal administration for their distressing needs (cf. Psalm 82.1-4), because God's "anointed ones" are sustained by their receiving wisdom from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (cf. I Samuel 10.9-13, 16.13, I Kings 3.28).

Psalm 2.7 gets quoted at the baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan river (Mark 1.9-11): "A voice from heaven said, 'You are my son, the one I love, in whom I am well pleased.'" That event was God commissioning Jesus with the second psalm, says the apostle Paul in his Antioch sermon (Acts 13, especially vv. 16-41), to be the incorruptible successor of David's mortal line, whose resurrection from the grave brings us the good news of forgiveness for sinners, not more prescriptions one needs to fill. So the second psalm reaches out, according to the Newer Testament, to our baptism. When you are baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you become an adopted child of God, an "anointed one" whom the LORD expects to mature into ordering things and ruling with a holy wisdom. God gives you diplomatic immunity for that task, says Paul: "God speaks comfort through us who are ambassadors for Christ" (II Corinthians 5.20).

On this very matter I cherish the Heidelberg Catechism question/answer #32:

Why are you called a Christian?

Because by faith I am a member of Christ
and so I share in his anointing.

I am anointed to confess his name,
to present myself to him

as a living sacrifice of thanks,
to strive with a good conscience
against sin and the devil in this life,

and afterward to reign with Christ
over all creation for all eternity.

The psalms hold for us today

With the second psalm as introduction, one may expect following psalms to deal with the rough and tumble of ordinary life: governing, fights, enemies, smashed dreams, tension, perseverance. Do you know how the earliest Christian believers were living in Scripture? Breathing in and out with Psalm 2, for example? Let me read you the straightforward passage of Acts 4.23-31:

When Peter and John [who had been arrested, held overnight incommunicado, then interrogated and threatened by the Jewish clerical authorities] were allowed to leave, they went to their own kind of people and reported everything the higher-up

Psalm 2 pulls us into the thick of public life.

priests and the elders had said to them. When those who were close to Peter and John heard it all, they raised their voices all together to God [in prayer]:

O Sovereign LORD, You who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and every creature in them--you LORD, who through the mouth of David our father, your child, moved by the Holy Spirit, said [quoting Psalm 2],

"So why do the non-Jewish nations foam at the mouth?

And why do peoples think up stupidities?

The kings of the earth step up to show themselves, and the rulers are assembled together against the LORD and against the LORD's anointed one"

—that's true [continues their prayer]: there were assembled in this very city against your holy child Jesus whom you anointed, Herod and Pontius Pilate, with both the non-Jewish nations and the peoples of Israel—they were assembled...to do whatever your hand and your deliberate counsel ordained would happen.

And now, Lord, look over their threats, and make it possible for your servants to speak your Word with all kinds of boldness, while You stretch out the hand for healing, and let signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy child Jesus.

When they had finished praying, the place in which they were gathered shook violently; and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they took to speaking the Word of God with boldness.

Luke recounts how followers of "the Way" (Acts 19.9,23 and 24.22) heard Psalm 2 speak directly to

their current affairs and persecuted life before the LORD. Living in Scripture they prayed an updated version of Psalm 2: "Kings of the earth like the traitor Herod, and rulers like what-is-truth Pilate, and leaders of Israel, in this very holy city, trumped up charges and executed the son of God! But You were laughing at them, LORD! because Jesus Christ is raised from the dead as You ordained. So now, please, LORD of the nations—we are your anointed ones too—amid their threats to get us, make us able to speak your Word with all kinds of boldness, while You bring healing into the world."

Acts 4 legitimates, I take it, as *bona fide* for us Newer Testament Christians to take Psalms 1, 2, and the whole book of psalm-prayers on our lips this way, provided we are pure-in-heart (as Psalm 15 asks), are not self-righteously judgmental (as Jesus puts it, Matthew 7.1-5), and if we can discern surely what battle God wants waged. It is not the USA vs. Saddam Hussein; it is not "concerned conservatives" vs. "progressive liberals"; that is, the battle that counts is never "us" against "them" ("Not for us, LORD, not for us,"—remember Psalm 115). The basic battle is between the LORD's name and Rule in world history under attack by godless, idolatrous, falsely good, deceptive forces within us as well as outside us undermining the faith of the anointed body of Christ. That fight is as close as our personal greed and as real as mass advertised Materialism, sophisticated academic Scepticism, and the weaseling principality of Secularism. The second psalm brings a believer today the gut courage to wield "the 'sword' of the Spirit," as Paul's rhetoric has it (Ephesians 6.10-20) in challenging God's enemies:

You earth judges and rulers, don't plot against

God's people, but follow their lead!

If you are living in the psalms, you will receive "much grace" (cf. Acts 4:33) to speak with such humble boldness, running to take shelter with God's Anointed One.

Illustration: reading and hearing

Psalm 23 with this orientation

One more matter here: let me illustrate what I've been proposing on the edited nature of the Psalm book, where the first and second psalms sketch horizons of the cosmic panorama of the LORD God's *torah* as backdrop for an embattled public

war theatre where God's presence takes on Herod, Pontius Pilate, bad leaders of God's folk, and anybody in the headlines (or by-lines) of 1999 A.D. How does recognition of the Psalm 1-2 literary focus make a difference in reading psalms? I'd also like to show how those last chorus lines of Psalm 2 have earthy grit and are not just a pious wish in the sky. Let me read PSALM 23 in your hearing:

PSALM 23 (A song for musical accompaniment, by David)

The LORD GOD is my shepherd (too).

I lack nothing. 1

In quiet spots of soft green grass

the LORD lets me settle down in peace. 2

(My shepherd) leads me out to flowing waters

giving rest.

The LORD brings me back to myself. 3

The LORD leads me in the tracks

of doing what's right

for the sake of God's (holy) Name!

Even if I have to walk through the

Valley of the shadows of Death, 4

I will fear no evil because You are with me.

Your shepherd crook and

your strong club reassure me.

You set table for me with a meal 5

right in front of my enemies!

You anoint my head copiously with oil.

My drinking cup is overflowing! –

It's true! (Your) covenantal mercy (*chesed*) and

what's creaturely good shall follow me up 6

all the days of my life,

and (someday) I shall dwell in the house of

the LORD God for as long as there are days. . . .

(translation 1997)

Many people use this favorite Psalm 23 for personal devotional comfort—good. One must be careful, however, not to restrict God's written Word to servicing one's own pressing peculiar problems. The first and second psalms prepare us to read and hear the book of psalms as public, communal tête-à-tête sessions with the living God. Not every psalm is oriented liturgically for a public worship service, but the very fabric and outreach of these deeply personal, poetic prayer-songs is not individualistic, but the expression of a communion of faith.

The Bible is clear: the LORD is shepherd of a people, a flock of sheep, if you will. The psalms

use the image again and again: we are the people, the sheep of God's pasture (Psalms 79.13, 95.7, 100.3). Important for anybody who reads Psalm 23 is to remember you are one of the flock. You are not alone, even if you feel that way, or want to be alone. That's why I slipped into the translation what is understood, "The LORD God is my shepherd (too)." We've got to overcome our individualism without adopting a "herd mentality." There are black sheep among us, stubborn sheep, a few who bleat a lot, some have blemishes, others limp, several are on rocky, slippery slopes, and some desperately need a rest—this is the Psalm 1-2 picture frame around Psalm 23. So when I read Psalm 23, my confession is: I am not the only sheep in the fold; the LORD God is my shepherd too. And I look around gratefully.

Psalm 23 is edited between Psalms 22 and 24—if you want to live in the psalms, then you always look at a psalm's neighbors in the book to pick up overtones. Psalm 22 is the sober song Christ knew by heart and quoted on the cross. "My God, O my God! Why have you left me in the lurch!" (vv. 1-11). Like ravenous wild dogs the enemies are circling in on me for the kill (vv. 12-21).

Enemies, according to the Bible, include death, cancer, depression, and any sinful violence that breaks down God's good creation and brings tears to our eyes or disfigures our face. So Psalm 23 is not a Victorian pastoral idyll of private sweetness and light; instead it grapples with death and my enemies, which have societal dimensions. If a follower of the Christ (Messiah) has no enemies—God-enemies which are wicked—you probably have poor faith-eyesight, weak biblical antennae. And then you would miss out on the promised prospect of Psalm 23 that God prepares a festive meal for you right in the thick of what's evil—Alzheimer's disease, antichrist hypocritical abuse, wretched poverty—I am an "anointed one" (v. 5), so I'll still be safe! Psalm 23 practices exactly what Psalm 22.22-24 promises: thank the LORD in the midst of the congregation for the LORD's coming through when it counted.

And Psalm 24 seems to celebrate what the last verse of Psalm 23 hopes for: entering the dedicated house of God to cheer the glorious LORD God of the mighty angels! Psalm 24 revels in the relaxing safety of being at home among God's people

away from the enemies. "To dwell in the house of the LORD God" (Psalm 23.6) does not mean you stay cooped up in a church building for eternity. Since Jesus was born, "the house of God" is "the body of Christ." One may revel in the liturgical celebration of word and sacrament with centering our selves as a cohering body with interlocking ligaments, but we are to exercise the communion of saints in daily life amid neighbors and enemies—Dordt College is to be "a house of God"—and the "shelter" provided us anointed ones is "the Word of the Lord," the leading of "the good shepherd" (John 10.1-30) who was able to feast thousands on five

*Psalm 23 is not a Victorian
pastoral idyll of private
sweetness and light.*

loaves of bread and a couple fish (Mark 6.30-44, 8.1-10) and stands nearby...outfitted with a club.

I cannot explicate now, as I should like, penitential psalms and the paeans of *halelu yah* in the psalter, nor the psalms that lament and the psalms with curses, because I must say something about the most important psalm in the book, and want to end with a couple of suggestions about living in the psalms.

Reading and hearing the gut of the Bible

What is so exciting for me is that I'm just discovering the psalms book as a whole edited book, and that if you give attention to the canonic literary shape of the Psalter and tease out hints of historical setting, you can become a more acute listening object! of the speaking text in its full-orbed revelation of God, God's will for human lives.

I still have to check out *Table D* in more detail how Psalm 1 to 145 plus the final doxology of Psalms 146-150 orient the book to the LORD God's *torah* and its affording wisdom to those who heed God's call, and how Psalm 2 to 144 cohere roughly with Psalm 72 and 89 as book ends around the revelation of God's redemptive working in history through the LORD's "anointed one" David and show that the covenant with Israel under the promise of Messiah holds open, if you will, the prospects of God's Rule mediated through the

priesthood of Jesus Christ.

It seems sound to me at this stage of my development to read books I, II, and III as Spirit-led collections of psalms conceived during Israel's monarchy and experience of temple worship (although not all these psalms were originally liturgical);⁷ and books IV and V, introduced by the premonarchic figure Moses' Psalm 90 and the *hodu leyahweh* ("Give thanks to the Lord") Psalm 107 (cf. also Psalms 118, 136) are post-exilic, Spirit-led collections of psalms which emphatically confess the sin of God's folk Israel—there are no more kings in David's historic line!—and look forward to the victory of the LORD God and God's Messiah over the enemies of God's people on earth, proclaiming the LORD God's royal Rule over all nations.

Psalm 110 is maybe the most important psalm in the book, intensifying the message of Psalm 2 in a book V way, because it is the most quoted Older Testament psalm in the Newer Testament. It follows the severe, screaming imprecatory Psalm 109: "Damn the merciless enemy, LORD (vv. 6-19); your *chesed* (vv. 12,16,21,26,31) demands you rescue the helpless being scornfully martyred—your name and Rule is at stake," especially since, as Paul states in Acts 13, this Jesus was the expected Messiah that Psalm 2 foretold (cf. Acts 13.32-43).

Let me read Psalm 110 as a commentator. Where are the breaks in poetic structure? Who is being addressed? The Revised Standard Version correctly, I think, takes v. 4 with vv. 1-3, a matter important for interpretation. The psalm begins as if the poet is reporting a scene of how Nathan might have spoken to David: "My lord, last night the LORD God said...."

The first paragraph (Psalm 110.1-4) says: David, when you go out to fight the Philistines, the heathen Syrians, Ammonites (II Samuel 7,10) and everybody under the sun, remember, (1) In your kingly office as an anointed one of the LORD, you have the power of sitting on God's right hand (110.1), and (2) You are a priest-king, not a warlord; you are a priest-king like old Melchizedek ("Melchizedek" means "king-doing-deeds-that-prove-true") of Salem, Jerusalem, in the days of Abraham (Genesis 14); you are called upon to fight and rule with deeds of setting-things-right as a priest, one who mediates between God and human

creatures, who brings the paltry sacrifices of the people to the LORD and the rich blessings of God back to the people (110.4).

The poet next (Psalm 110. 5-7) addresses the people about David, "my [lc] lord" (v. 1). What follows refers to David as anointed ruler, viceregent for the LORD in Zion. These verses also refer to Jesus Christ, as Newer Testament quotations make clear (Matthew 22.42-45, Acts 2.34-36).

"God's anointed one" refers to sinful saint David, Jesus Christ on the cross, and those who confess Heidelberg Catechism answer #32. As a follower of Jesus Christ I am "a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek"—if that drills through your mind into your heart, you become a new creature (II Corinthians 5.17-19)!

If you are not just dipping into the psalms for spiritual kicks, like checking God's yellow pages in the divine phone book for something you want for the weekend, but are seriously reading to hear the gut of God, what it cost God to save us piddling sinners and set straight the mess we have made of God's world and human society, then your Christian reading of the Older Testament psalms needs to ponder their enduring, multiple fulfillment overlay: the psalms' good news (1) in the original B.C. time-setting when they were spoken and scripted; (2) in the Newer Testament A.D. period when God's people received the psalms as sacred scripture revealing God's promises at hand; and (3) in our "last days" (Cf. I Timothy 4.1-4, II Timothy 3.1-9, II Peter 3.1-7), the era after Jesus Christ's resurrection until the Lord comes again. Catch how Psalm 110 holds out the sterling mandate to be an "anointed" priest-king-or-queen for the LORD in the order of Melchizedek (I Peter 2.9-10).

Jewish zealots read Psalm 110 enthusiastically, except verse 4. That's why the Newer Testament book "to the Hebrews" makes so much of Melchizedek (Hebrews 4.14-8.13): not by Aaron /Abraham blood, but by an anointing in faith from the Holy Spirit do you become a true child of Abraham, adopted by the LORD God; and the Rule of the LORD is not a put-down, but is a caring, leading rescue operation effecting reconciliation even among enemies, though it cost you your life (cf. I John 2.18-29).

The biblical psalms are God's love letters written to you, me, anybody able and willing to read the

script and listen to God speak from God's gut. The psalms are oral poetry; so we should read them out loud (the way people used to read), sing them in public together.

If you want to live in the psalms, I have three suggestions: (1) Dwell in the book. Become immersed in the text; read and reread the whole, the five parts, clusters of neighboring psalms. Yield to what the psalm text says, let it come over you. Memorize the psalms, or write tunes for them. Just you and God for a while, possibly with a reliable written companion (see bibliography) before you share reading God's love poems aloud with others.

(2) Study the psalter in wonderment. If at all possible, read the psalms also in a language that is not your mother tongue, because then you have to read more slowly, look up words in a dictionary, puzzle over meanings. Accept what at first seems strange: God is blamed for eating away what is dear to me like a moth! (Psalm 39.11); God finally got up like a ranting drunk (says Psalm 78.65)—is this a way to talk about God? Well, take it in, don't read the psalms first of all like a theologian, as if the text be a repository of themes or proofs for and against certain dogmas. This is God-breathed poetry where you are meant to meet the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not a systematic theology or a worldview but a real person who powerfully inhabits a human and gentles you out of your sinful wits into becoming a wise child able to love one's unlovable neighbor, fulfilling the Lord's *torah!* (cf. Romans 13.8-10, Galatians 5.25-6:2).

(3) Discover echoes of the psalms throughout Scripture. If the book of psalms becomes familiar to you, its details will not be loose trivia but will start to resonate everywhere in the Older and Newer Testaments. The pained reality the psalms confess in faith reveals the "suffering servant" side of God, too, and gives an Older Testament memory, grit, and color to the Newer Testament message about the Way of thankful salvation incarnated in Jesus Christ.

END NOTES

1. *Viz.*, "with David's signature": 86,101,103,108- 110, 122,124, 131, 133, 138-145.
2. Cf. Psalms 120, 126, and nearby Psalms 136, 137.
3. The first two psalms are the only ones in the Septuagint with no superscriptions.
4. Cf. my *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1980), pp. 10-18 for a translation and exposition of Psalm 19.
5. In my judgement, despite good insights Walter Brueggemann misreads Psalm 1 here as a "simplistic" tract which claims that all is right in God's world, moral obedience fends off trouble, and the wicked perish (cf. especially pp. 66-79 in "Bounded by obedience and praise: the Psalms as Canon." *JSOT* 50 [199]). Brueggemann's exposition misses the stereo tone of Psalm 1 (with Psalm 2) of God's troubled beckoning hearers to become blessed as embattled anointed ones rather than to stand around as scoffing sinners pressed by judgement.
As best as I can determine, Brueggemann works self-consciously out of a dialectical scheme (orientation, disorientation, new orientation) which, despite *caveats*, he forces upon the psalm book so that the "trustful naivete of Psalm 1" which "is not adequate to lived experience" has to be overcome, transcended and superceded" via psalms like pivotal 73 before one reaches the uncluttered praise of Psalm 150.
Because of his dialectical philosophical frame (and concern to upset a mindless conformist piety in the church), Brueggemann introduces and prioritizes, it seems to me, notes of "subversive" protest and "countercultural activity" (cf. *Praying the Psalms* [Winona: Saint Mary's Press, 1982], pp. 15-25; *The Message of the Psalms, a theological commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984], pp. 9-23; "Response to James L. Mays, 'The Question of Context,' in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann [*JSOT Supplement* 1 59, 1993] pp. 40-41; also with Brueggemann's questioning whether "'book as context' is desirable," p. 30). This project is foreign, I think, to the thetical affirmation of trusting the LORD to come through in our pained but certain Melchizedek service.
6. The conference participants were led in hearing Psalm 2 by the powerful reading voices of Jerelyn Schelhaas, Dave Schelhaas, and Nick Lantiga.
7. For example, Psalm 51 was added to by God-breathed editors for use in the worship service of Israel, Psalm 91, Cf. 130, 130.

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Table A

Edited books of the Psalter

41	I	anonymous	1-2, 3-41:13	(mostly "...of David")
31	II	Qorah	42/43-72:18-19,20	(mostly "...of David")
17	III	Asaph	73-89:58	(mostly Asaph & Qorah)
17	IV	Moses	90- 106:48	(mostly anonymous)
44	V	anonymous	107-145/146-150	(mostly anonymous)

150

Table B

Titled sorts of psalm (approximations)

30	<i>shir</i>	song to sing, chant
57	<i>mizmor</i>	melody for music, tune
1	<i>shigaywon</i>	dirge
6	<i>miktam</i>	script
5	<i>tephilah</i>	intercessory prayer
13	<i>maskil</i>	meditative poem
1	<i>tehilah</i>	praise song
16	<i>halelu yah</i>	exultant shout of celebration

(21 without any specification)

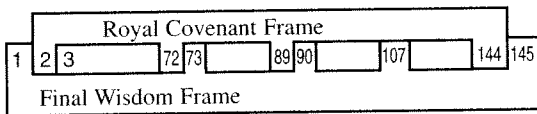
Table C

Near synonyms for (1) torah (Weisung, guidance, leading)

(2)	<i>'edut</i>	testimonies, <i>testimonia</i> , <i>magnalia Dei</i>
(3)	<i>piqqud</i>	command, 10 word covenant, <i>mandata</i>
(4)	<i>choq</i>	cosmic ordinance, providence, <i>statuta</i>
(5)	<i>mitswah</i>	task, <i>praecepta</i>
(6)	<i>mishpat</i>	ordering judgment, <i>jura</i>
(7)	<i>dabar</i>	authoritative, saving, working word, <i>verbum</i>
(8)	<i>'imrah</i>	authoritative speech (poetic)
(9)	<i>derek</i>	way
(10)	<i>'orah</i>	path (poetic)

Table D:

Editorial framework for psalm book



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