

1-1-2011

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Brandon L. Fredenburg
brandon.fredenburg@lcu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Fredenburg, Brandon L. (2011) "The World-Making Power of the Psalms," *Leaven*: Vol. 19: Iss. 3, Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol19/iss3/3>

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The World-Making Power of the Psalms

BRANDON L. FREDENBURG

The psalms have power. Their plain, direct words rise from raw, unfeigned emotion. Anger, joy, despair, trust, love and hate express themselves in concrete terms of ordinary Israelite life. In memorable poetic style, ancient Israel's psalmists speak, yell, murmur, sob, curse, thank, praise, sing and pray their lives as worshipers gathered before God. Their world is life lived as faith and faith lived as life. The psalms began as prayer-songs of lived reality and, when written and sung again in community, they evoke a new reality. This is their power.

For millenia, this power has intrigued those who want to understand it.¹ Biblical scholars, for instance, have examined the art and rhetoric of these psalms and their uses in worship. Prior to the mid-1980s, most studies classified the psalms into various types. The structures, themes and images led scholars to identify personal or communal laments, hymns of praise, royal psalms, thanksgivings, Zion psalms and several other genres.² These insights still remain helpful. In 1979, Brevard Childs' *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*³ opened a new direction of study. Scholars began to consider more fully how a carefully arranged, edited Psalter affected Israelite theology and worship. Their conclusion, immensely valuable for us, is this: the Psalter's editors recognized the psalms' power to shape the thought-world of worshipers not yet born (cf. Ps 22.30–31). They formed the Psalter to pass on Israel's living faith to generations that would live in new historical, social and geographical situations.

The Psalter is grounded in historical events and recalls them, but its primary function is to exemplify and guide faith through worship. In *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith shows that *worship* primarily shapes our construal of reality. The content and rhythms of worship educate and form our interior life far more deeply than explicit teaching. Integral to worship, of course, are prayer and song. The practice of prayer, Smith writes,

makes us a people who always see that there's more going on than meets the eye . . . Praying enacts an entire cosmology because implicit in the very act of prayer is an entire ontology and construal of the God-world relationship.⁴

In short, prayer evokes new reality. Likewise, singing fundamentally informs our spiritual intuition: this is "why memorization of Scripture through song is so effective. Song soaks into the very core of our being,

1. Susan E. Gillingham's encyclopedic *Psalms through the Centuries: Volume One* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; London: Blackwell, 2008) and William L. Holladay's *Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993) are extremely useful.

2. Still unsurpassed in its simplicity and reverence is Claus Westermann's *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*, trans. R. Guerke (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

3. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

4. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 193.

which is why music is an important constitutive element of our identity.”⁵ Our prayers and hymns reflect and inform our theology, and through these we perceive and reconceptualize the world we encounter.

Fidelity to our divine heritage calls us to (re)discover, repeat and appropriate the controlling images, motifs and metaphors in the psalms. The Psalter’s language must become our language, its values our values, its vision our vision, its purpose our purpose. Situating our lives into Israel’s prayers—so that their internal dynamics enliven our desires, thoughts and actions—is the essence of our own spiritual formation.⁶ In what follows, we explore one view of what spiritual formation based in the psalms can look like. To begin, we review four grounding beliefs in the Psalter. Next, we look at ways to make the Psalter’s language our own. Finally, we briefly consider the special problem of curses in the psalms.

GROUNDING BELIEFS

The psalms offer many riches for spiritual guidance; we could begin anywhere and go in many directions.⁷ Through prolonged reading in the Psalter, we discover variations on four recurring beliefs, each centered in God: God’s control in the world, God’s covenant faithfulness, God’s concern for justice and God’s coming kingdom. Like four legs on a chair, these affirmations stabilize ancient Israel’s encounter with its world and they do the same for us.

God’s control in the world

Against ancient rival cosmologies, the psalms declare that Israel’s God controls the universe. James L. Mays makes a strong case that “The LORD reigns” is the primary motif of the Psalter,⁸ but other descriptions of God’s roles also abound. Psalmists worship God as deliverer, judge, refuge, protector, avenger, savior, shepherd, defender, rock, warrior and other nouns. When in prayer we reflect on the roles in which the psalmists cast God for Israel’s story, both our vocabulary of address and our theology expand. We see God at times exalted as “the great King above all gods” (Ps 95.3), nearer as a caring shepherd (Ps 95.7), and an intimate guide and creator always with us (Ps 139). Before theologians coined the terms *omnipotence* and *omnipresence*, psalmists hymned these aspects of God’s roles. Prayer and song preceded theological construction.

A word of caution is in order: we must embrace the whole vocabulary of God’s portrayals, not simply those we find pleasant. If we avoid thoughts of God as a wrathful, righteous judge (Pss 7.8b, 11; 50), as a scoffer (Ps 2.4), or as an attacker (Ps 38.1–3), we domesticate God and narrow our vision of his control in the world. The psalms do contain dark images of God, but these are painted against the backdrop of Israel’s claims on God’s character.

God’s covenant faithfulness

God’s roles in the psalms manifest God’s covenant-keeping character. The essential description of God’s character comes from Exodus 34.5–7. Nearly every psalm repeats or echoes these words used to describe the Divine Name to Moses:

And the LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with [Moses] and declared the Name,
The LORD: “The LORD: a merciful and gracious god, slow to anger, abundant in steadfast
love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to the thousandth [generation], forgiving

5. Ibid., 171–72.

6. Walter Brueggemann describes this dynamic as “orientation,” “disorientation” and “new orientation.” An accessible point of entry to his many contributions to Psalms studies is *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2d ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007).

7. Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 295–373 AD) wrote one of the earliest Christian discussions of the use of the Psalter for spiritual formation in his *Letter to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms*, available here: <http://www.athanasius.com/psalms/aletterm.htm> (accessed April 3, 2011).

8. James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation." (my translation)

It is comforting to sing and pray the more positive first half, but we must embrace the whole description. Some find, as Walter Brueggemann does, a disturbing ambiguity: "There is something in Yahweh's sovereign rule—Yahweh's own self-seriousness—that is not compromised or conceded, even in the practice of solidarity."⁹ To be sure, God's actions can perplex, but there is no deep ambiguity here. God's covenant with Israel held blessings for fidelity *and* curses for disloyalty (Deut 28), but also promised restoration after effectual punishment (Deut 29). God's faithfulness appears as *both* forgiveness *and* punishment, often in shocking ways (cf. Nah 1.2–3 vs. Jonah 4.2). Perhaps the greater difficulty of this text for ancient and contemporary readers is the drastically unbalanced symmetry of the extent of forgiveness to punishment.

With words like *grace, mercy, compassion, slow to anger, steadfast love, unfailing love, faithfulness, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin* (cf. Pss 51.1–3; 86.5, 15; 145.8), psalmists press God to fulfill promises on their behalf in the present, or they ground their confidence on God's future fidelity. Similarly, we hear this tradition in references to "the Name" of God. "The Name" refers to God's honor and character, which Israelites define in recitals of God's faithful deeds (cf. Pss 9; 18; 78). Finally, when psalmists use words like *judge, justice* and *righteousness* to themselves, the wicked, or their enemies, they allude to concepts in the second half of this tradition. Indeed, when God acts in covenant faithfulness, it is frequently to establish justice for the oppressed.

God's concern for justice

The Psalter often invokes God's character in calls for justice for the weak, orphaned, poor, oppressed, afflicted and needy of Israel (cf. Pss 9–10; 12; 82).¹⁰ Especially in communal laments, worshipers demand that God humiliate or destroy the wicked and the enemies of Israel, and deliver the righteous from their oppression. The righteous are the upright who turn to God for relief in their distress; they trust God to show his covenant faithfulness *for* them *against* the wicked and they praise God's Name when he acts to establish justice and righteousness. God sometimes acts unilaterally to do this, but often he works through his people or the king.

The suffering righteous form an "assembly of the righteous" (Ps 1.5)—a community that mediates God's covenant faithfulness to those still in need (Pss 20; 22.22–26; 33). "Throughout the Psalter," Rolf Jacobson observes, "the righteous are those who provide hospitality and community for others who are beleaguered and assaulted."¹¹ Often, their faith vicariously sustains the despondent. In many psalms, the righteous recall both God's faithfulness and their covenant obligations, as well as speak hope into the psalmists' despair (cf. Pss 24; 29; 82; 97)—though, sometimes, even hope is stunningly absent (Ps 88). The righteous model for us a community *of* faith *for* faith. Israel's king stands at their head.

The royal psalms mention the Davidic king (Pss 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 110; 132; 144) and describe the authority and tasks of God and God's anointed king in ways that very nearly merge the two (cf. Pss 45.6–7; 72.17a). Anointed by God (Ps 2), the Davidic king is God's surrogate to aid the helpless and to establish justice in Israel, as Psalm 72.1–4, 12–14 demonstrates. This idealized monarch "incarnates" God's relationship to his people and to all the nations (Ps 110). Whether a Davidic king ever attained this ideal momentarily, Psalms 89 and 132 reflect the end of the Davidic line in the Exile and expect that God's faithfulness to David will restore that line in Zion when God's reign comes fully.

9. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 218.

10. See the excellent discussion by Rolf A. Jacobson, "'The Faithfulness of the Lord Endures Forever': The Theological Witness of the Psalter," *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 111–137. The entire volume is very useful.

11. *Ibid.*, 134.

God's coming kingdom

God's concern to establish justice and righteousness in all the earth through a Davidic king was already a future expectation when post-exilic editors closed the Psalter. Confidence in God's promise to David (Ps 89.1–37), shaken by the exile, generates new calls for God to fulfill his promise (Ps 132.10–18). For example, in the psalms of ascent (Pss 120–134), Israelites thank God for a restored Jerusalem and temple; yet, they press for more: the ideal has still not arrived (cf. Ps 126). Although the psalmists never paint a complete picture of what they anticipate, a few texts offer clues.

Psalm 110 was central to messianic understanding in post-exilic Judaism, especially in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament. It claims God will extend the Messiah's rule over his enemies from "the nations" and "the whole earth" (Ps 110.6). This assumes God's own universal rule over "all the earth" and its nobles (Ps 47.1–2, 7–10), a rule not yet realized completely (Pss 86.8–10; 96; 98). When it is, the kings of the earth, who represent the wicked in rebellion (Ps 2), join Israel's praise to the God of Abraham (Pss 22.27–28; 45.7–9; 102.13, 15–16, 21–22; 138.4–5; 148.11) because they receive the blessing promised through Abraham (Gen 12.3) and the Davidic king (Ps 72.17). Although not all the psalmists perceive this incorporation of the nations into the promises of Abraham and David, others clearly point to it, as Christopher J. H. Wright shows.¹² In Psalm 87, God even enrolls historical enemies Babylon, Egypt, Philistia and Tyre, along with Cush, as natural-born citizens of Zion, Israel's capital. This universal vision of the redemption of all nations is a cause for both ancient and contemporary praise, heralded exuberantly in Psalm 145.

When by prayer and song we repeat the Psalter, these four dominant beliefs can reshape our lives over time. Our spiritual formation is a gradual process by which we come to embody the character, concerns and intentions of the God we worship. The prayer-songs of the Psalter create new worlds. This change is individualized, but we can assert several common results.

First, we gain clarity about who is in control. An awareness of the roles our God held in Israel's cultural imagination presses us to rebuke the rival gods of our cultures—economic uncertainty, political jockeying, international turmoil, corporate greed and personal ambition—and to challenge their claims in the name of our God. Second, we come to share God's character. In a world full of too frequent and self-serving criticism, we approach others openly, in kindness, compassion, patience, tenacious commitment and fidelity. We do not avoid plain correction and discipline for the others' sake, and we return to compassion quickly for our own sake. Like our God, we readily extend forgiveness for every variety of offense and pursue reconciliation.

Third, our senses become more attuned to others' needs and suffering. With realism born in both prayer and practice, we discern what "righteous" and "wicked" look like. In a humility that neither confesses too much nor denies too little, we see our own failures and successes and the multiple ways people are oppressed. At the same time, we extend confidence to those who need support. Finally, trusting God's power to orchestrate his intended future and its redemptive promises for all creation, we invoke God's Name over all forces of wickedness and destruction. We offer praise at the certain prospect that Israel's God, our God, will be exalted in all the earth and that all people will bow in homage (Ps 22.27–30; cf. Isa 45.20–25; Rev 5.11–14). We storm the gates of Hades in our confidence that every enemy including death will be subdued (Ps 110.1; 1 Cor 15.26). God, and God alone, is our Rock and our Redeemer.

12. See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), especially chapter 14.

INHABITING THE PSALTER

This world-creating power shapes us when we inhabit the Psalter's words, images, motifs and metaphors through constant prayer and praise. Learning how to dwell in the psalms is neither quick nor easy, but the process is simple and ancient. The post-exilic editors not only passed the Psalter to future generations, they told us how to receive it: "The teaching of the LORD is his delight, and he recites that teaching day and night" (Ps 1.2). At their direction, we *vocally recite* the psalms until they indwell us. With daily practice, we discover that these words teach, train, correct and equip us to lives of righteousness. When, *by repeated vocalization*, the psalms seep into our memory, they create a *thesaurus* (literally, a treasury) from which to draw insights both old and new (cf. Matt 13.52). Learning the Psalter in song is of inestimable value, but I want us to focus on the psalms' words.

Most begin psalm intake by reading in them once a day. Reading the whole Psalter takes about three hours, but it is better to read in short segments. In fifteen minutes daily, we can speak the Psalter just over twice in a month and fifteen times in a year. For variety, a "psalm of the day" method is useful.¹³ Each month, read every thirtieth psalm according to the number of the day. For example, on the 4th of the month, read Psalms 4, 34, 64, 94 and 124; on the 18th, read Psalms 18, 48, 78, 108 and 138. Save Psalm 119 for the 31st. There are also daily Bible reading plans that cycle through the psalms several times a year. These useful and popular methods encourage psalm *reading*. Other approaches, like fixed-hour prayer, join psalm reading with prayer.

In the long history of fixed-hour prayer practices (also called the "Liturgy of the Hours," "the Divine Office," or simply "the Office"),¹⁴ the norm is to pray all the psalms in a one-, two-, or four-week cycle—with the four-week cycle most common among non-monastics. These cycles distribute the psalms into purposeful collections for morning, evening and sometimes midday prayers. I highly commend the following two approaches.

For those who want to engage just the psalms "day and night," the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) divides the Psalter sequentially into thirty morning and evening readings. These divisions can be written on a bookmark or marked in a Bible and used to pray through each division daily. This simple approach does not require a BCP or familiarity with other material in the Divine Office. For those interested in liturgical prayer, there are multiple guides to the Divine Office. Some are multivolume and complicated; others are very slender and selective in which psalms are used. After experience with a half dozen or so, I prefer *The Paraclete Psalter* because of its simplicity and nearly singular focus on the psalms.¹⁵ All the psalms appear in a four-week cycle, distributed into prayer at daybreak (Lauds), midday, dusk (Vespers) and bedtime (Compline). The multiple prayers, refrains and readings in other guides for each "hour" are reduced to one prayer for the day and an optional meditation at night. The Psalter is central.

The world-making power of the psalms indwells us to the degree that their language becomes our language (cf. Eph 5.18b–20; Col 3.12–17). Our approach incorporates two elements. First, it is best to vocally recite from the Psalter daily. The daily frequency, psalm order, cycle length and liturgical practices are matters of preference. Second, we should speak the *entire* Psalter. This insistence that the whole Psalter inform our worship raises one final issue: how should Jesus-believers deal with curses in the psalms?

13. David Robinson, *Ancient Paths: Discover Christian Formation the Benedictine Way* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 49–50.

14. This ancient routine is rooted in the morning and evening prayers for the temple sacrifices, the thrice daily prayer habit of Daniel (Dan 6.10), the prayer times of the apostles (see Acts 3.1; 10.3, 9), and the well-documented second-century Christian observance of prayers at dawn, 9:00 a.m., 12:00 noon, 3:00 p.m. and dusk. The earliest Jesus-believers integrated the psalms into their prayers following prevailing Jewish custom (cf. Acts 4.23–30).

15. *The Paraclete Psalter: A Book of Daily Prayer* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010).

CURSES IN THE PSALMS

Christian readers inevitably discover a tension between Jesus' command to "love your enemies" (Matt 5.43–48), Paul's directive to "repay no one evil for evil" (Rom 12.17–21) and the psalmists' frequent curses against their enemies. Curse elements appear in both personal and communal laments across the Psalter (e.g., Pss 12; 35; 55; 58; 59; 69; 79; 83; 109; 129; 137). Some Christian interpreters omit these altogether, skipping verses while reading. It is hard to be dogmatic, but I advise maintaining them. Consider these points.

First, the curses are one sign of God's faithfulness. God incorporated curses in the covenant to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12.3). Calls for God to destroy enemies are not peripheral to Israel's theology; they originate in God's decision to establish justice and eliminate wickedness from creation—however God determines.

Second, the curses are not invoked gratuitously or enacted readily. The Davidic king and the community invoke God's curses when mortal danger threatens. As bearers of Abraham's blessing to all creation, Israel and its king must withstand every onslaught for the sake of the world. Even then, God does not act on Israel's schedule. Some psalmists yell in frustration at God's perceived indifference; invoking the curses can be acts of desperate faith.

Third, God remains free to respond however he wants, consistent with his purpose for all creation. Jonah's curse of Nineveh is on-point and shocking; Jonah knows God extends covenant faithfulness to non-Israelites. Psalm 87 makes the same point for Israel's enemies: Babylon, Egypt, Philistia and Tyre (see also Isa 19.16–24; Ezek 16.53–63).

Fourth, invoking God's intervention relinquishes personal vengeance. God is the righteous avenger for his Name's sake. By calling for a curse, the psalmist denies himself the role of judge and accepts God's response. This frees the psalmist to act with neighbor-love toward his enemy, as David did to Saul (Lev 19.17–18; Exod 23.4–5).

Finally, despite the previous observations, some calls for curses in the Psalter display only raging, base vindictiveness. We pray these in discerning, tentative confession, allowing the words to probe for similarities between our heart and what we perceive in the psalmist. Keeping these words in our reading ensures we receive the grace of correction. At times, praying these curses reflectively may serve, like Nathan's parable to David, to unmask our self-deception.

James K. A. Smith is right that *worship* is most basic in forming our cultural and spiritual identities. In this essay, I have developed a simple point: the Psalter, in its entirety, is an immensely valuable resource for prayer and song that we must use to join our hearts, voices and hands with a long line of Israelites and Jesus-believers in their effort to welcome God's consummate reign. Through its words passed down to us, as we recite them in prayer-reading daily, we learn to think, value, desire and perform the way of the righteous. In this way, we are blessed; in this way, we inhabit a new world.

BRANDON L. FREDENBURG IS THE ASSISTANT DEAN FOR THE COLLEGE OF BIBLICAL STUDIES AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES AT LUBBOCK CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY IN LUBBOCK, TEXAS, A MEMBER OF THE BROADWAY CONGREGATION IN LUBBOCK, AND RECENTLY ASSISTED THE CENTRAL CHURCH OF CHRIST IN AMARILLO, TEXAS, AS AN INTERIM PREACHING MINISTER.

