



Spirituality of the Psalms
Walter Brueggemann

The Measure of a Man
Martin Luther King Jr.

The Sayings of Jesus
The Sayings Gospel Q in English
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Walter Brueggemann

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Preface

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The Psalms and the Seasons of Life

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The Psalms and the Seasons of Life

Laugh at ministers all you want,
they have the words we need to hear,
the ones the dead have spoken.

Rabbit in John Updike, *Rabbit Is Rich*

It can surely be said that
the Psalter presents a struggle
of the just against the unjust.

José Porfirio Miranda, *Communism in the Bible*

The Book of Psalms provides the most reliable theological, pastoral, and liturgical resource given us in the biblical tradition. In season and out of season, generation after generation, faithful women and men turn to the Psalms as a most helpful resource for conversation with God about things that matter most. The Psalms are helpful because they are a genuinely dialogical literature that expresses both sides of the conversation of faith. On the one hand, Israel's faithful speech addressed to God is the substance of the Psalms. The Psalms do this so fully and so well because they articulate the entire gamut of Israel's speech to God, from profound praise to the utterance of unspeakable anger and doubt. On the other hand, as Martin Luther understood so passionately, the Psalms are not only addressed to God. They are a voice of the gospel,

God's good word addressed to God's faithful people. In this literature the community of faith has heard and continues to hear the sovereign speech of God, who meets the community in its depths of need and in its heights of celebration. The Psalms draw our entire life under the rule of God, where everything may be submitted to the God of the gospel.

Psalm interpretation is at the present time beset by a curious reality. There is a devotional tradition of piety that finds the Psalms acutely attuned to the needs and possibilities of profound faith. (To be sure, some of that devotional literature is less than profound.) This tradition of Psalm usage tends to be precritical, and is relatively uncomplicated by any scholarly claims. There is also a well-established scholarly tradition of interpretation with a rather stable consensus. This tradition of interpretation tends to be critical, working beyond the naïveté of the devotional tradition, but sometimes being more erudite than insightful. These two traditions of interpretation proceed without much knowledge of, attention to, or impact on the other. The devotional tradition of piety is surely weakened by disregarding the perspectives and insights of scholarship. Conversely, the scholarly tradition of interpretation is frequently arid, because it lingers excessively on formal questions, with inability or reluctance to bring its insights and methods to substantive matters of exposition. This cleavage, of course, must not be overstated, for there are some contacts and

overlaps among interpreters, but that contact is limited, modest, and too restrained.

What seems to be needed (and is here attempted) is a postcritical interpretation that lets the devotional and scholarly traditions support, inform, and correct each other, so that the formal gains of scholarly methods may enhance and strengthen, as well as criticize, the substance of genuine piety in its handling of the Psalms.

1. A long, faithful history of Psalms interpretation has developed in the service of the gospel that has been undisturbed even by the critical consensus. Today this understanding is embodied in personal piety that focuses on a few well-known and well-beloved Psalms, especially Psalms 23, 46, and 121. Such popular piety tends to be highly selective in the psalms used and frequently quite romantic in its understanding of them, so that the Psalms serve to assure, affirm, and strengthen faithful people. This selective (and romantic) tendency is reinforced by much liturgical practice in the church.

My criticism is nevertheless restrained, because the Psalms permit the faithful to enter at whatever level they are able – in ways primitive or sophisticated, limited or comprehensive, candid or guarded. The faithful of all "sorts and conditions," with varying skills and sensitivities, here find "the bread of life" as abiding nourishment. Any critical scholarship must respect that gift that is given and received in this literature, even if we do not understand the

manifold ways in which that communication occurs.

2. Behind and before this popular contemporary usage, which continues the practice of many generations, we must also take account of another pre-critical use. Not only simple believers, but the great teachers of evangelical faith have also found the Psalms a peculiar resource for faith. They did so without the aid of much of our contemporary scholarship. Especially the great Reformers (Martin Luther and John Calvin) were driven in their evangelical passion and discernment precisely to the use and study of the Psalms.

These understandings of the Psalms are not only precious to us; they are decisive. We must not permit any of the gains of later critical scholarship to detract us from these claims. This, however, is not to suggest that the great reformers were "precritical." They did indeed practice and advance the best critical modes of study available to them, as we must.

We are not pre-critical people. We are heirs of a scholarly consensus that must not only be taken into account, but must be embraced as our teacher. In what follows, I shall try to deal with the Psalms, fully informed by the scholarly consensus, which may be summarized rather simply.

The main gains of Psalms scholarship have been made by the form-critical approach of Hermann Gunkel. It was his great insight that the forms of expression and modes of articulation in the Psalms

can for the most part be understood in a few recurring patterns. (To be sure, not all psalms can be categorized in this way, and we need feel no special pressure to do so.) Moreover, these few typical modes of speech expressed certain characteristic gestures of faith, and they presumably reflect certain recurring life situations and/or liturgical practices. Thus what Gunkel saw is the convergence of modes of speech, religious claims, and social settings.

Based on Gunkel's insights concerning the form of these genres, our study of the Psalms may focus upon the typical, though details and specific developments in individual psalms must be noted. The rich details demonstrate the remarkable openness of the typical to various developments in the hands of various speakers.

The second major advance in Psalms study was made by Sigmund Mowinckel, a student of Gunkel. Mowinckel developed the hypothesis, which has attracted widespread and persistent scholarly attention, that these representative psalms are best understood in a single liturgical setting that dominated Israel's life. Mowinckel proposed that many of the psalms reflect the annual enthronement festival, enacted dramatically in the Jerusalem temple at New Year's time. In that festival, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is dramatically and liturgically re-enthroned for the new year, which is the renewal of creation and the guarantee of well-being. The

Davidic king in Jerusalem plays a major role in that ceremony, and of course, derives great political gain from the theological claims of the liturgy. Mowinckel found a way to comprehend many of the psalms in his remarkable hypothesis.

Scholarly reaction to his hypothesis is twofold. On the one hand, the hypothesis makes claims that are too broad and incorporates too many psalms of various kinds into a single action. And that action itself is premised on unsure comparisons, given the lack of clear Israelite evidence. Thus Psalms interpretation must be more pluralistic and diversified in order to allow the Psalms freedom to operate in many different aspects of Israel's life. On the other hand, for all its excessiveness, Mowinckel's hypothesis still occupies the center of the field and still provides the best governing hypothesis that we have. Thus we may permit it to inform our work as long as we treat it as provisional and are attentive to its temptation to be all-encompassing. It must be treated as a proposal and not as a conclusion. But given renewed interest in the liturgical character of the Psalms, Mowinckel's study offers a great many important insights for finding analogous uses in our own liturgical practice.

A third scholarly gain is the contribution of Claus Westermann. Following the form analysis of Gunkel and ignoring the liturgical hypothesis of Mowinckel, Westermann has urged that the complaint song is the basic form of psalmic expression, and that most

other psalm forms are derived from or are responses to the complaint. He has shown that the complaint song expresses the basic moves of faith in God, ranging from deep alienation to profound trust, confidence, and gratitude. The major contribution of Westermann for our study is the discernment of a literary dynamic in the movement of the Psalms that corresponds to and gives voice to the dynamic of faith that we know in our experience with God.

4. This discussion will pursue a postcritical reading of the Psalms. That is, we shall try to take full account of the critical gains made by such scholars as Gunkel, Mowinckel, and Westermann, without betraying any of the precritical passion, naïveté, and insight of believing exposition. Specifically there is a close correspondence between the anatomy of the complaint song (which Westermann as a critical scholar has shown to be structurally central for the entire collection) and *the anatomy of the soul* (which Calvin related to his discernment and presentation of biblical faith). To pursue that close correspondence, we shall propose a movement and dynamic among the Psalms that suggests an inter-relatedness, without seeking to impose a rigid scheme upon the poems, which must be honored, each in its own distinctiveness. Above all, we intend our interpretation to be belief-full, that is, in the service of the church's best, most responsible faith.

The following discussion is organized around

three quite general themes: psalms of *orientation*, psalms of *disorientation*, and psalms of *new orientation*. It is suggested that the psalms can be roughly grouped this way, and the flow of human life characteristically is located either in the actual experience of one of these settings or is in movement from one to another. By organizing our discussion in this way, we propose a correlation between the gains of critical study (especially Gunkel and Westermann) and the realities of human life (known to those who most use the Psalms in a life of prayer).

(a) Human life consists in satisfied seasons of well-being that evoke gratitude for the constancy of blessing. Matching this we will consider "psalms of orientation," which in a variety of ways articulate the joy, delight, goodness, coherence, and reliability of God, God's creation, and God's governing law.

(b) Human life consists in anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death. These evoke rage, resentment, self-pity, and hatred. Matching this, we will consider "psalms of disorientation," poems and speech-forms that match the season in its ragged, painful disarray. This speech, the complaint song, has a recognizable shape that permits the extravagance, hyperbole, and abrasiveness needed for the experience.

(c) Human life consists in turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy breaks through the despair. Where there

has been only darkness, there is light. Corresponding to this surprise of the gospel, we will consider "psalms of new orientation," which speak boldly about a new gift from God, a fresh intrusion that makes all things new. These psalms affirm a sovereign God who puts humankind in a new situation. In this way, it is proposed that psalm forms correspond to seasons of human life and bring those seasons to speech. The move of the seasons is transformational and not developmental; that is, the move is never obvious, easy, or "natural." It is always in pain and surprise, and in each age it is thinkable that a different move might have been made.

But human life is not simply an articulation of a place in which we find ourselves. It is also a movement from one circumstance to another, changing and being changed, finding ourselves surprised by a new circumstance we did not expect, resistant to a new place, clinging desperately to the old circumstance. So we will suggest that the life of faith expressed in the Psalms is focused on the *two decisive moves of faith* that are always underway, by which we are regularly surprised and which we regularly resist.

One move we make is *out of a settled orientation into a season of disorientation*. This move is experienced partly as changed circumstance, but it is much more a personal awareness and acknowledgment of the changed circumstance. This may be an abrupt or a slowly dawning acknowledgment. It constitutes a

dismantling of the old, known world and a relinquishment of safe, reliable confidence in God's good creation. The movement of dismantling includes a rush of negativities, including rage, resentment, guilt, shame, isolation, despair, hatred, and hostility.

It is that move that characterizes much of the Psalms in the form of complaint and lament. The complaint psalm is a painful, anguished articulation of a move into disarray and dislocation. The complaint song is a candid, even if unwilling, embrace of a new situation of chaos, now devoid of the coherence that marks God's good creation. The sphere of disorientation may be quite personal and intimate, or it may be massive and public. Either way, it is experienced as a personal end of the world, or it would not generate such passionate poetry.

That dismantling move is a characteristically Israelite move, one that evokes robust resistance and one that does not doubt that even the experience of disorientation has to do with God and must be vigorously addressed to God. For Christian faith that characteristically Israelite embrace of and articulation of disorientation is decisively embodied in the crucifixion of Jesus. That event and memory become the model for all "dying" that must be done in faith. That is why some interpreters have found it possible to say that the voice of anguish in the Book of Psalms is indeed the voice of the Crucified One. I do not go so far, and prefer to say the Christian use of the Psalms is illuminated and required by the

crucifixion, so that in the use of the Psalms we are moving back and forth among reference to Jesus, the voice of the psalm itself, and our own experiences of dislocation, suffering, and death. There are, of course, important distinctions among complaint psalms. Thus *psalms of the innocent sufferer* more directly apply to Jesus than do the *psalms of penitence*. Nonetheless, taken as a whole, that dimension of the history of Jesus is a major point of contact for complaint psalms.

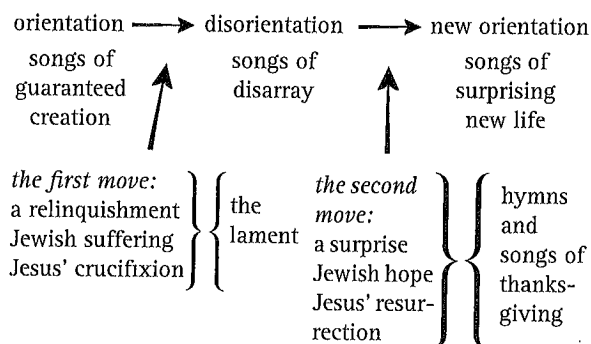
The other move we make is a move *from a context of disorientation to a new orientation*, surprised by a new gift from God, a new coherence made present to us just when we thought all was lost. This move entails a departure from the "pit" of chaos just when we had suspected we would never escape. It is a departure inexplicable to us, to be credited only to the intervention of God. This move of departure to new life includes a rush of positive responses, including delight, amazement, wonder, awe, gratitude, and thanksgiving.

The second move also characterizes many of the psalms, in the form of songs of thanksgiving and declarative hymns that tell a tale of a decisive time, an inversion, a reversal of fortune, rescue, deliverance, saving, liberation, healing. The hymnic psalm is a surprising, buoyant articulation of a move of the person or community into a new life-permitting and life-enhancing context where God's way and will surprisingly prevail. Such hymns are a joyous

assertion that God's rule is known, visible, and effective just when we had lost hope.

That astonishing move is a characteristically Israelite move, one beyond reasonable expectation, one that evokes strident doxology because the new gift of life must be gladly and fully referred to God. For Christian faith, that characteristic Israelite articulation and reception of new orientation is decisively embodied in the resurrection of Jesus. That is why the church has found it appropriate to use such hymns with particular reference to Easter. This means that the use of these hymns and songs of thanksgiving moves back and forth among references to Jesus' new life, to the voice of Israel's glad affirmation, and to our own experience of new life surprisingly granted.

We may chart our way of relating the form of the Psalms to the realities of human experience:



The theological dimension of this proposal is to provide a connection among (a) focal moments of Christian faith (crucifixion and resurrection), (b) decisive inclinations of Israelite piety (suffering and hope), (c) psalmic expressions that are most recurrent (complaint and praise), and (d) seasons in our own life of dying and being raised. If the Psalms can be understood with these knowing sensitivities, our own use of them will have more depth and significance in the practice of both Jewish and Christian forms of biblical faith. In the last analysis, the Psalms have what power they have for us because we know life to be like that. In a society that engages in great denial and grows numb by avoidance and denial, it is important to recover and use these psalms that speak the truth about us — in terms of God's engagement with the world.

5. Before moving to the Psalms themselves, three preliminary comments need to be made.

(a) Clearly the move through this grid of orientation — disorientation — new orientation is not a once-for-all experience. In different ways, we frequently find ourselves in varying conditions in relation to God; but neither do I want to suggest any regularized movement of a cyclical kind. It is not difficult to see, however, that yesterday's new orientation becomes today's old orientation, which we take too much for granted and defend. John Goldingay has made the shrewd point that we not only slide from new orientation to old orientation,

but also may find the same psalm serving to express either, depending on the context and intention of the speaker. Thus while I have offered a matrix, I do not want it taken too precisely, for life is in fact more spontaneous than that. I offer it simply as a way to suggest connections between life and speech, or as Paul Ricoeur puts it, between "limit experiences" and "limit expressions."

(b) The experience that these psalms interface may be of various kinds. Conventionally scholars have made a distinction between *communal* and *personal complaints*, and Westermann has correlated with that *songs of thanksgiving* and *hymns*. No doubt that is correct. But the point I make is that experientially, in terms of faith situation, the personal and public issues are all of a piece, and depending on our commitments, each may be experienced as the same threat or surprise of faith. I prefer to speak impressionistically, so that the actual experience may be of many different kinds, as long as it summons us to the same dynamics of faith.

(c) Such a grid in two movements reveals an understanding of life that is fundamentally alien to our culture. The dominant ideology of our culture is committed to continuity and success and to the avoidance of pain, hurt, and loss. The dominant culture is also resistant to genuine newness and real surprise. It is curious but true, that *surprise* is as unwelcome as is *loss*. And our culture is organized to prevent the experience of both.

This means that when we practice either move — into *disorientation* or into *new orientation* — we engage in a countercultural activity, which by some will be perceived as subversive. Perhaps that is why the *complaint psalms* have nearly dropped out of usage. Where the worshiping community seriously articulates these two moves, it affirms an understanding of reality that knows that if we try to keep our lives we will lose them, and that when lost for the gospel, we will be given life (Mark 8:35). Such a practice of the Psalms cannot be taken for granted in our culture, but will be done only if there is resolved intentionality to live life in a more excellent way.