

# Our Hearts Wait

Worshiping through Praise  
and Lament in the Psalms

*Walter Brueggemann*

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*To Kathleen M. O'Connor, Christine Roy Yoder, William P. Brown,  
and Brennan W. Breed, for sustaining vibrant study of  
Old Testament traditions at Columbia Theological Seminary*

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## Series Preface

*I* have been very pleased that David Dobson and his staff at Westminster John Knox Press have proposed this extended series of republications of my work. Indeed, I know of no old person who is not pleased to be taken seriously in old age! My first thought, in learning of this proposed series, is that my life and my work have been providentially fortunate in having good companions all along the way who have both supported me and for the most part kept me honest in my work. I have been blessed by the best teachers, who have prepared me to think both critically and generatively. I have been fortunate to be accompanied by good colleagues, both academic and pastoral, who have engaged my work. And I have been gifted to have uncommonly able students, some of whom continue to instruct me in the high art of Old Testament study.

The long years of my work that will be represented in this series reflect my slow process of finding my own voice, of sorting out accents and emphases, and of centering my work on recurring themes that I have judged to merit continuing attention. The result of that slow process is that over time my work is marked by repetition and reiteration, as well as contradiction, change of mind, and ambiguity, all of which belongs to seeing my work as an organic whole as I have been given courage and insight. In the end I have settled on recurring themes (reflected in the organization of this series) that I hope I have continued to treat with imagination, so that my return to them is not simply reiteration but is critically generative of new perspective and possibility.

In retrospect I can identify two learnings from the philosopher and hermeneut Paul Ricoeur that illumine my work. Ricoeur has given me names for what I have been doing, even though I was at work on such matters before I acquired Ricoeur's terminology. First, in his book *Freud and Philosophy* (1965), Ricoeur identifies two moves that are essential for interpretation. On the one hand there is "suspicion." By this term Ricoeur means critical skepticism. In biblical study "suspicion" has taken the form of historical criticism in which the interpreter doubts the "fictive" location and function of the text and hypothesizes about the "real, historical" location and function of the text. On the other hand there is "retrieval," by which Ricoeur means the capacity to reclaim what is true in the text after due "suspicion." My own work has included measures of "suspicion" because a grounding in historical criticism has been indispensable for responsible interpretation. My work, however, is very much and increasingly tilted toward "retrieval," the recovery of what is theologically urgent in the text. My own location in a liberal-progressive trajectory of interpretation has led me to an awareness that liberal-progressives are tempted to discard "the baby" along with "the bath." For that reason my work has been to recover and reclaim, I hope in generative imaginative ways, the claims of biblical faith.

Second and closely related, Ricoeur has often worked with a grid of "precritical/critical/postcritical" interpretation. My own schooling and that of my companions has been in a critical tradition; that enterprise by itself, however, has left the church with little to preach, teach, or trust. For that reason my work has become increasingly postcritical, that is, with a "second naiveté" a readiness to engage in serious ways the claims of the text. I have done so in a conviction that the alternative metanarratives available to us are inadequate and the core claims of the Bible are more adequate for a life of responsible well-being. Both liberal-progressive Christians and fundamentalist Christians are tempted and seduced by alternative narratives that are elementally inimical to the claims of the Bible; for that reason the work of a generative exposition of biblical claims seems to me urgent. Thus I anticipate that this series may be a continuing invitation to the ongoing urgent work of exposition that both makes clear the singular claims of the Bible and exposes the inadequacy of competing narratives that, from a biblical perspective, amount to

idolatry. It is my hope that such continuing work will not only give preachers something substantive to preach and give teachers something substantive to teach, but will invite the church to embrace the biblical claims that it can “trust and obey.”

My work has been consistently in response to the several unfolding crises facing our society and, more particularly, the crises faced by the church. Strong market forces and ideological passions that occupy center stage among us sore tempt the church to skew its tradition, to compromise its gospel claim, and to want to be “like the nations” (see 1 Sam. 8:5, 20), that is, without the embarrassment of gospel disjunction. Consequently I have concluded, over time, that our interpretive work must be more radical in its awareness that the claims of faith increasingly contradict the dominant ideologies of our time. That increasing awareness of contradiction is ill-served by progressive-liberal accommodation to capitalist interests and, conversely, it is ill-served by the packaged reductions of reactionary conservatism. The work we have now to do is more complex and more demanding than either progressive-liberal or reactionary-conservative offers. Thus our work is to continue to probe this normative tradition that is entrusted to us that is elusive in its articulation and that hosts a Holy Agent who runs beyond our explanatory categories in irascible freedom and in bottomless fidelity.

I am grateful to the folk at Westminster John Knox and to a host of colleagues who continue to engage my work. I am profoundly grateful to Davis Hankins, on the one hand, for his willingness to do the arduous work of editing this series. On the other hand I am grateful to Davis for being my conversation partner over time in ways that have evoked some of my better work and that have fueled my imagination in fresh directions. I dare anticipate that this coming series of republication will, in generative ways beyond my ken, continue to engage a rising generation of interpreters in bold, courageous, and glad obedience.

Walter Brueggemann



## Editor's Introduction

*I* began theological education just as Walter Brueggemann was scheduled to retire at Columbia Theological Seminary. I knew very little about the academic study of religion, probably even less about the state of biblical scholarship at the turn of the twenty-first century, yet somehow I knew enough to take every possible course with Dr. Brueggemann. After retiring, Walter continued to teach a course periodically and work from his study on campus—and he always insisted that it and any pastor's work space be called a “study” rather than an “office”! But before he retired, during his last and my first year at Columbia, I took six different courses in biblical studies, including three with Walter. In my memory, I spent that academic year much like St. Thecla as she sat in a windowsill and listened to the teachings of the apostle Paul. According to her mother's descriptive flourish, Thecla, “clinging to the window like a spider, lays hold of what is said by him with a strange eagerness and fearful emotion.” It was for me as it had been for Thecla.

Longtime readers as well as those encountering Walter's words for the first time will discover in the volumes of the Walter Brueggemann Library the same soaring rhetoric, engaging intelligence, acute social analysis, moral clarity, wit, generosity, and grace that make it so enlightening and enjoyable to learn from and with Walter Brueggemann. The world we inhabit is broken, dominated by the special interests of the wealthy, teeming with misinformation, divided by entrenched social hierarchies, often despairing before looming ecological catastrophe, and callously indifferent, if not aggressively predatory, toward those facing increasing deprivation and immiseration.

In these volumes readers will find Walter at his best, sharply naming these dynamics of brokenness and richly engaging biblical traditions to uncover and chart alternative forms of collective life that promise to be more just, more merciful, and more loving.

Each volume in the Walter Brueggemann Library coheres around a distinct theme that is a prominent concern across Walter's many publications. The contents of the volumes consist of materials taken from a variety of his previously published works. In other words, I have compiled whole chapters or articles, sections, snippets for some volumes, and at times even just a line or two from Walter's publications, and sought to weave them together to create a new book that coheres around a specific theme, in this case the theme of worship in the book of Psalms.

We have learned immensely from Walter Brueggemann's numerous publications on the content as well as the consequences of biblical worship. Among the many biblical texts that he has considered, Brueggemann unsurprisingly focuses especially on the Psalms, about which he has written extensively.<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging that Brueggemann's contributions are many and various, one can begin to grasp his influence on our understandings of biblical worship, and of the Psalms in particular, from three distinct angles.

First, Brueggemann's work emphasizes the potential power contained in our language and practices of worship to construct, order, and shape the reality in which we live (see especially chaps. 2–5, 8, 9, and 12). Brueggemann embraces and exhorts readers to appreciate the extent to which language provides the medium that brings humans into relationship with one another in formal, composed social relations and institutions. With the crucial caveat that no particular social order is necessary, fixed, or natural, Brueggemann encourages readers to consider and be more intentional about how the language and practices of worship shape our communal relations, contribute to our ideas about God, and serve as a foundation for various values and commitments. From this perspective, worship is the arena through which communities can strive to create more justice and contribute to more flourishing in ways that better reflect the church's understanding of the gospel.

It is worth mentioning briefly that Brueggemann's analysis and embrace of the constitutive power of liturgy runs counter to certain

prevailing trends in the humanities that have only strengthened in the years since he first published these ideas. Much humanistic scholarship has been devoted to placing value on particularity, celebrating instability, and privileging decomposition—in short, the ways in which systems and collectives inevitably come apart. These developments render Brueggemann's embrace of the structuring, formalizing, and constitutive power of liturgy even more important. While attention should be paid to the ways that our constructed and formalized social and political relationships can break down, involve exclusions, instill hierarchies, and so on, complete formlessness in human communities is not an ideal worthy of aspiration. Brueggemann helps us understand how and why we should analyze and appreciate the extent to which our language and liturgies build relationships, create spaces, and shape orders in ways that can be more or less deliberate, just, compassionate, inclusive, faithful, and so on.

Second and relatedly, Brueggemann is uniquely attentive to social and political dynamics related to worship and the content of the Psalms. I imagine that these parts of the following chapters may be most surprising to readers who are new to Brueggemann's work. Most of us probably do not think about religious worship as a political act, much less as a radically subversive political activity. And yet this is a central argument in the following chapters (see especially chaps. 3–5, 9, and 12). Moreover, Brueggemann explains why he thinks that the Psalms and biblical worship are politically subversive, not only in the context of ancient Israel, but also and even especially in the contemporary context of (most of) his readers. The act of worshipping the biblical God inevitably entails the neglect if not outright rejection of alternative authorities that compete for our loyalty. And the Psalms are filled with protest, complaint, and lament, often about issues that are public, political, and economic.

The Psalms articulate a pervasive public agenda to which God is inextricably linked. This public agenda unfolds dynamically over the course of the Psalms, and while it is not articulated in systematic terms in any single text, it consistently reflects a vision of the world as an interdependent place in which all human, natural, and social formations not only depend upon God but are also mutually conditioned. Thus, whether in lament about injustice, complaint about violence or impoverishment, or in thanksgiving for deliverance

and abundance, God is entangled in the public and personal, and in human and nonhuman affairs, throughout the Psalter. Brueggemann also shows how these aspects of the Psalms function to set into relief the social issues, policy commitments, and economic arrangements of contemporary readers. Furthermore, as developed most extensively in chapter 9, communities that fail to provide space for the robust expression, recognition, and thus the legitimation of the dark sides of the Psalms—that is, lament, complaint, protest, imprecation—will, perforce, neglect if not censure the thorny issues and tough questions about social and political justice that underlie these expressions.

Third and finally, much of Brueggemann's work is informed by his breakthrough insight linking the findings of literary scholars about the different forms or genres of the Psalms with the philosopher Paul Ricoeur's observations about the seasonal flux of lived, human experience. Ricoeur suggests that human lives tend to settle in periods of relative stability or orientation, until they are inevitably disrupted by some disorienting event, out of which, eventually, we may find our lives newly oriented. Brueggemann perceives that these seasons roughly correspond to the three main types of psalms: songs of praise (orientation), lamentation (disorientation), and thanksgiving (new orientation). These seasons of life do not determine the use or efficacy of a particular type of psalm. Instead, Brueggemann suggests that seasons of orientation might incline one toward psalms of praise, disorientation toward laments, and new orientation toward thanksgiving. (Incidentally, this explains my organization of this volume into three parts, following the more general introductory essays in part 1.) But one need not be in a season of disorientation to utter a lament, and the utterance of a lament can, functionally, orient an individual or community toward the life circumstances that might lead one to write or identify with words of lamentation, protest, and complaint. Brueggemann's typology is also functional in the sense that it permits us to consider how a particular (type of) psalm might impact individuals and communities, and—especially in chapter 9 as mentioned above—how the neglect or prohibition of a particular (type of) psalm could have costly consequences for individuals and communities.

The chapters in this book are only a sample of the many contributions that Brueggemann has made to our collective understanding of worship in the biblical tradition. They reflect and elaborate these three, rather flexible, areas of Brueggemann's interest, and also venture into other questions and concerns related to worship in the Bible. I hope this volume will urge readers to explore Brueggemann's work on this topic further. Even more, I hope that it will incite in readers a desire to form new social bonds through worship practices, develop richer experiences and deeper passions in any and every season of readers' lives, and energize communities of faith to recognize injustices and create and advocate for more just, healthy, and flourishing forms of collective life.

I am grateful to numerous people for their encouragement and help. First on the list is Walter Brueggemann, whose faith in and patience with me has begun to seem endless, even as I know that it must demand great effort and care at times. Also, I continue to admire the wise and supportive team at Westminster John Knox—and only in part because they are so good at making my work better! In particular, the energy, editorial gifts, and passionate convictions that Julie Mullins so graciously brings to her projects are infectious and truly joyful.

For the past five years I have benefited and learned much from the leadership and lucid mind of my department chair, Kevin Schilbrack. Kevin, the College of Arts and Sciences, and Appalachian State University have continued to provide me with support and encouragement on this and many other projects. I feel deeply fortunate for the help and contributions of many colleagues, family, and friends over the past few pandemic-filled and exceedingly difficult years. To list any seems a slight to many, but I should warmly thank Brennan Breed, Rick Elmore, Kelly Murphy, Brent Strawn, Roger Nam, Sylvie Honigman, Pearce Hayes, Joe Weiss, Kathy Beach, Grimes Thomas, Francis Landy, Carol Newsom, and Joe and Sara Evans. In different ways, each has been an irreplaceable companion and source of inspiration.

Finally, I want to thank my family, immediate and extended, and especially my wife, Stephanie, to whom I remain exceedingly indebted. If on any particular day I am inspired, insightful, funny,

or passionate, it is surely because of Stephanie and our children's incredible, joyful, and beautiful companionship. While my heart still waits, my capacity for full-throated lament and praise is undoubtedly made possible by these and many other gracious comrades journeying alongside me.

Davis Hankins  
Appalachian State University  
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PART ONE

Worship in the Bible

## Introduction to the Book of Psalms

When we come to the question of worship in the Bible, the book of Psalms is unquestionably the indispensable starting point. The book of Psalms, complex in its formation and pluralistic in its content, is Israel's highly stylized, normative script for dialogical covenantalism, designed for many "reperformances":

- It is *complex in its formation* because the psalms seem to arise from many variant settings in diverse times, places, and circumstances. The collection of Psalms, moreover, is itself a collection of subcollections, at least some of which were extant before the book itself was formed.
- It is *pluralistic in its content*, reflecting many different sources and advocacies, so a rich diversity of theological voices is offered in it.
- It is *highly stylized*, so that there are predictable speech patterns that become, through usage, familiar. These patterns can be identified according to rhetorical genres that reflect characteristic usage. As a result, it appears that certain patterns of speech are intimately and regularly connected to certain kinds of human experience and circumstance. As a consequence, one may, with some imagination, read backward from speech patterns to social contexts.
- It is *designed for reperformance*. The Psalms offer expressions of praise and prayer that have been found, over generations, to be recurrently poignant and pertinent to the ebb and flow of human life. Generations of Jews and Christians have found



the Psalms to be a reliable resource for the articulation of faith, but also for the authentic articulation of life in its complexity. Along with usage in worship, the Psalms have been reformed as instruction, as the young have been socialized and inculcated into the lifeworld of the Psalms that includes both buoyant hope and a summoning ethic that belong to this singing, praying community.

- The book serves *dialogic covenantalism*. The praise and prayer expressed therein assume and affirm that this is a real transaction: there is a God on the other end of the singing and speaking. The two partners, Israel and YHWH, are bound in mutual loyalty and obligation. This relationship refuses both parties autonomy without responsible connection, and yet requires defining self-assertion without subservient submission. Thus the practice of the Psalter protects the community from both religious temptations of negating the reality of God and negating the legitimacy of the life of the community.

## Two Psalmic Extremities

### Gratitude and Praise

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

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

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

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

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

The gladness of thanksgiving matches the exuberance of praise, only there is much more specificity in the articulation of thanksgiving. Those who are thankful can “count their blessings” and identify the gifts of God. Thus in Psalm 116 the speaker can remember and recount the prayers of petition previously uttered in a circumstance of need (vv. 1–3). The “snares of death” refers to some circumstance in which the speaker was left helpless. But now, after the crisis, the

speaker has been “delivered” by God (v. 8) and is restored to “the land of the living,” that is, to full bodily well-being and social acceptance (v. 9).

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

### Lament and Complaint

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

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

vv. 1–3

The language in this instance is intimately personal. But the genre of lament and complaint can also include public crises that concern the entire community. This may refer variously to drought, war, or, quintessentially, the destruction of Jerusalem. In Psalm 44, the

community employs assaulting rhetoric in addressing God for being abusive and neglectful. In verses 9–14, the language is dominated by an accusatory “you.” But the “us” on the receiving end of alleged divine (mis)conduct is the accent point in the psalm. All that matters is what has happened to “us.” The rhetoric is against God, accusing God of renegeing on promises of fidelity.

## Two Theological Foci

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

### Torah Obedience and the Promise of *Shalom*

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

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;  
for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Ps. 1:5–6

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

## Jerusalem, David, and the Temple

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

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

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

The LORD swore to David a sure oath  
 from which he will not turn back:  
 “One of the sons of your body  
 I will set on your throne.  
 If your sons keep my covenant  
 and my decrees that I shall teach them,  
 their sons also, forevermore,  
 shall sit on your throne.”  
 Ps. 132:11–12

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

This Jerusalem tradition also pertains to the temple, which is the epitome of an ordered world. So we have “Songs of Zion” in the Psalter that celebrate the city of Jerusalem and the temple as the epicenter of cosmic reality. The best known of these Zion songs is Psalm 46, which celebrates the assured presence of God in the city, even in the face of instability and the threat of chaos. The Songs of Ascent in Psalms 120–134, a now distinct subcollection in the Psalter, were

perhaps pilgrim songs initially sung by those in religious procession on their way to the temple. These include Psalm 121, which is in the voice of a traveler at risk, and Psalm 122, which speaks of going up “to the house of the LORD.” Many of these psalms bear the residue of actual liturgical practice.

These several hymnic enhancements of Jerusalem are matched and countered by psalms that reflect on and respond to the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon in 587 BCE. Thus Psalm 74:4–8 describes in some painful detail the way in which invading forces have violated the temple. Better known is Psalm 137, in which the deportees from Jerusalem are taunted to sing “a song of Zion” in a foreign land. While some might doubt that the phrase “Song of Zion” in Psalm 137 is a technical phrase, it nevertheless most likely refers to a corpus of psalms (Pss. 46, 48, 76, 84) and others like them that celebrated the temple. Taken together, these Songs of Zion and the laments over the temple and the city dramatize the hold the temple held on Israel’s imagination. In Christian usage, moreover, the loss of the temple and the rebuilding of the temple in the Persian period were transposed so that they became a way of speaking about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (see John 2:18–22).

### The Shape of the Psalter

Finally, it may be noted that the Psalter is divided into five distinct “books,” each of which culminates with a sweeping doxology. Interpreters presently are considering clues that suggest that these several “books” may have been formed as they are by design, so that the sequence of psalms is not random but aims, in itself, to make a theological statement. In such a hypothesis, each psalm is placed strategically to serve the larger whole. The five books are, perhaps, designed as a match for and reflection of the five books of Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy), Israel’s most normative literature. Seen in this light, the Psalter is always an echo of that normative tradition. And while Christians are often tempted to overlook the particularity of the Psalms and to transpose them into a more generic spirituality, in fact this psalmic poetry belongs to the particularity of this specific Israelite community of praise and prayer. And as the church took

over the Psalter for its own use in worship and instruction, it has reread it with reference to the Gospel claims of Jesus of Nazareth.

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

### The Primary Character of the Psalter

The chapters that follow elaborate various ways in which the world freshly mediated by the Psalms opposes the world that has shaped us and to which we cling. For the rest of this chapter, I focus on the Primary Character that makes the counterworld of the Psalms so different and compelling in contrast to our closely held world. This Primary Character is YHWH, and YHWH is a lively character and a real agent of firm resolve who brings transformative energy and emancipatory capacity to all our social transactions.

I will draw the contrast as starkly as I can. The world we hold closely is “without God,” that is, without the god attested in the script of the Psalms. To be sure, our closely held world is not without its god or gods, but it is definitely without this God. We may characterize the available gods of our closely held world as idols, the ones described in Psalm 115:

They have mouths, but do not speak;  
 eyes, but do not see.  
 They have ears, but do not hear;  
 noses, but do not smell.  
 They have hands, but do not feel;

feet, but do not walk;  
 they make no sound in their throats.  
 vv. 5–7

These gods are objects and not subjects; they are not agents, not capable of transformative action. In the words of Isaiah’s mock address to these gods, “do good, or do harm, that we may be afraid and terrified. You, indeed, are nothing and your work is nothing at all” (Isa. 41:23b–24a).

- They are the usual suspects: the gods of patriotism, nationalism, capitalism, and mastery of knowledge.
- They are the gods of scholastic conservatism that go under the banner of “evangelical,” the ones so tied up in formula and proposition and logic that yield certitude that they cannot save. As the psalm says, they cannot “make a sound in their throats” (Ps. 115:7) because they specialize only in immutability.
- They are the gods of progressivism who conform to Enlightenment rationality and who never bother anyone; the gods who, in the words of the psalm, have hands but cannot feel because, as the saying goes, “God has no hands but our hands.”

There is a collusion here among the neo-atheists, the scholastic reductionists, and the urbane progressives to have a god who is either remote from all worldly reality and does not engage with us or who is so intimate with us that we choose to be “spiritual but not religious,” which means, I believe, something like: “I am not accountable to anyone, and neither God nor I have any public staying power in faith.”

Now perhaps this is an overly stark presentation of the false gods, but no more so than the indictment found in Psalm 115. Alongside that poem, there are two more famous characterizations of such divine irrelevance. In Jeremiah 10, we are treated to a Feuerbachian manufacture of gods:

For the customs of the peoples are false:  
 a tree from the forest is cut down,  
 and worked with an ax by the hands of an artisan;  
 people deck it with silver and gold;



## 12 Our Hearts Wait

they fasten it with hammer and nails  
so that it cannot move.  
Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field,  
and they cannot speak;  
they have to be carried,  
for they cannot walk.  
Do not be afraid of them,  
for they cannot do evil,  
nor is it in them to do good.

Jer. 10:3–5

And in Isaiah 44, there is a mocking of phony gods and those who make them:

The ironsmith fashions it and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers, and forging it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong, among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. (Isa. 44:12–15)

Worst of all, several texts observe that if one worships such gods, one becomes like them: passive and mute, nothing more than a couch-potato consumer of the National Security State:

Those who make them are like them;  
so are all who trust in them.

Ps. 115:8

[They] went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves.

Jer. 2:5

[They] consecrated themselves to a thing of shame,  
and became detestable like the thing they loved.

Hos. 9:10

I focus on the theme of “without god” because I want to underscore that the counterworld of the Psalms witnesses to and makes available a God of agency, who shatters the serene sedation of our closely held world. This witness and availability happen only in, with, and under this script—by word, song, dramatic performance, responsive litany, and all the ways in which our closely held world of control and failure is broken open. Thus, the scripting of the Psalms is a subversive act that intends to undo the dominant version of reality. Through the words, phrases, images, and metaphors given there, we receive an odd alternative that requires us to reconsider our closely held world. The Psalms mediate to us the leading character of the creator God who will judge the living and the dead; the covenant-making God of Israel who waxes and wanes in presence and absence, in fidelity and infidelity, who comes, we say, enfleshed at Nazareth, and so is preoccupied with matters of the flesh, with life and death, with wealth and poverty, with wisdom and foolishness, with power and weakness, with beginning and ending and endings and beginnings—the deep, thick stuff of life in the world that cannot be given in memos or syllogisms, but only in narrative and in poem.

The Psalter, in a word, is a God-occupied corpus, which leads to at least seven crucial observations:

### The Earth Will Yield Its Fruit

1. The Psalms invite us to trust and so move away from anxiety about scarcity, precisely because this is *the God of abundance*, who gives freely and without limit. It is the assurance of this God that the earth will yield its fruit in due season:

As long as the earth endures,  
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,  
summer and winter, day and night,  
shall not cease.

Gen. 8:22

A New Testament exhibit of this guarantee is the twelve baskets of loaves left over, because “your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Matt. 6:32). But without this God we are left in scarcity and in endless anxiety.

### God Prepares a Table

2. The Psalms invite us to generosity, not greed, because this is the God who *prepares a table* for us in the presence of our enemies (see Pss. 23:5; 78:19). This God is always setting the table of abundance, always preparing more, always supplying bread for those who are hungry, always cooking fish on the seashore, always setting a welcome table for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan:

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,  
 and plants for people to use,  
 to bring forth food from the earth,  
 and wine to gladden the human heart,  
 oil to make the face shine,  
 and bread to strengthen the human heart.

Ps. 104:14–15

How striking that this ancient doxology on creation can name the central elements of sacramental life:

*wine* to gladden the heart;  
*oil* to make the face shine;  
*bread* to strengthen the human heart.

It is always these three—wine, oil, and bread: wine poured out like blood, bread broken like body, oil to anoint the dying and the baptized. Wine, oil, bread—these are the stuff of life, the stuff of sacrament, the stuff of sign.

Without the God given in this script, there may be wine, but it is likely our own product; there may be bread, but we baked it; there may be oil, but we squeezed it from the olives. And when we produce, bake, and squeeze, there is never enough, and we must hoard. But this script has always known that this wine, bread, and oil are gifts—gifts beyond our effort, gifts that, like grits and like grace, “just come.”

### A Summons to Trust

3. The Psalms summon us to *trust another* and to give up our desperate self-sufficiency. In a world without God, we had better be adequately self-sufficient, because in that world there is no free

lunch. But this God breaks the need for and the possibility of self-sufficiency. Thus, in Psalm 73, the speaker envies those who are rich, powerful, and cynical their endless successful prosperity. But when he goes to the sanctuary, to the place where the Psalms are recited, he comes abruptly to a double awareness. On the one hand, he concludes that the cynically self-sufficient cannot endure:

Truly you set them in slippery places;  
 you make them fall to ruin.  
 How they are destroyed in a moment,  
 swept away utterly by terrors!  
 They are like a dream when one awakes;  
 on awakening you despise their phantoms.  
 Ps. 73:18–20

On the other hand, the psalmist comes to the recognition that the weapons of self-sufficiency no longer have any attraction for him, because he is now attracted only to the God of life and fidelity:

Whom have I in heaven but you?  
 And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.  
 My flesh and my heart may fail,  
 but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.  
 vv. 25–26

This script invites us to move from the world of commodities that will never give us life, to the world of communion in which Another Presence is more than adequate for our life in the world.

### God the Truth-Teller

4. As elaborated in later chapters, the Psalms script us for truth-telling that breaks the killing force of denial. It is no surprise, then, that it is the *truth-telling God* who first told the truth about us:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
 I have called you by name, you are mine.  
 Isa. 43:1

That is the bottom-line truth of our existence. Or in the wondrous words of the Heidelberg Catechism, “That I belong to my faithful

savior, Jesus Christ.” That I belong! That I belong to Another. This defining truth is what permits us to tell our own truth, and we are heard into newness. In our closely held world, we dare not risk telling the truth, because it will not be heard; or, even if it is heard, it will not be honored, and may even be used against us.

But not in the Psalms, because this God is a listener. So we tell our secrets in the holy presence. The psalmist describes the high cost of silent denial:

While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
 through my groaning all day long.  
 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
 My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.  
 Ps. 32:3–4

But emancipatory healing came through truth-telling:

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
 and I did not hide my iniquity;  
 I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”  
 and you forgave the guilt of my sin.  
 v. 5

This practice of speaking and hearing is richly attested in the laments, in the full articulation of our life before the one from whom no secrets are hid. When we practice such disclosure, we find that in having our truths heard and known, we are transformed and empowered to new life and well-being. This was, of course, the great insight of Freud in the twentieth century, but it was no accident that Freud was a Jew who knew this script. And as Freud confounded the Victorian world of Vienna, so also this truth-telling and the God who hears it always confound our closely held world of denial.

### God the Promise-Keeper

5. The Psalms mediate to us the great *promise-keeper* whose resolve guarantees that the world is not a closed system. Creation, instead, is a world very much in process, sure to come to full *shalom*. Despair is the fate of a world “without god,” where there are no new gifts to be given. The Psalms refuse that world, knowing that God is not yet

finished. Consequently, the Psalms can gather all the great words of the covenant and apply them to the future:

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
 righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
 and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
 The LORD will give what is good,  
 and our land will yield its increase.  
 Righteousness will go before him,  
 and will make a path for his steps.

Ps. 85:10–13

Here the entire vocabulary of fidelity is thrown toward the future—steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace, faithfulness twice, righteousness three times—all in the “will” of the not-yet.

At the center of this hope is YHWH: “The LORD will give.” Psalm 85 imagines the steps of this God into a future of well-being. As a result of that divine resolve, the earth will yield and yield and yield. There is more to come, and it is good. There is more to come because God said, long before Martin Luther King Jr., “I have a dream,” a dream of *shalom*. We live toward that dream because God’s dream will not be defeated.

### Community of Deep Memory

6. The Psalms exhibit *a community of deep memory*, a memory of fidelity, transformation, and miracle; a memory, moreover, that becomes present reality and passionate possibility. What God has done, God will do. Thus, in the psalmic expression of Lamentations 3, the poet describes how Israel in exile had lost all hope. But then there is a stunning reversal by means of memory:

But this I call to mind,  
 and therefore I have hope:  
 the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
 his mercies never come to an end;  
 they are new every morning;  
 great is your faithfulness.

Lam. 3:21–23

In the script, Israel continually and consistently meets to recite the steadfast love, faithfulness, and mercy of God. Israel names names and times and circumstances and specificities. And Israel knows that what is remembered presses into contemporary life, so that present life, like remembered life, is an arena for fidelity with and before God.

It comes as no surprise, then, that God is the great rememberer:

He has remembered his great love and faithfulness  
to the house of Israel.  
All the ends of the earth have seen  
the victory of our God.

Ps. 98:3

As a father has compassion for his children,  
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.  
For he knows how we were made;  
he remembers that we are dust.

103:13–14

The reference to dust harkens back to Genesis 2: God remembers the moment of creation when we were formed of earthly fragility. And out of that divine remembering, God has compassion like that of a parent for a child.

To be sure, this God has a delete button, but it is for the deletion of offenses:

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy,  
blot out my transgressions.

Ps. 51:1

This delete button is all about “blotting out” transgression. This God, with great freedom, works toward our best selves and our best world, deleting what must be forgotten, remembering what must be treasured and reformed. It is precisely because of this divine freedom that God’s world is so different from our closely held one, which is so permeated by amnesia that nothing precious can be treasured. That is why we meet regularly, with script in hand, to “do this in remembrance.”

## A Light Yoke and Easy Burden

7. The summons of the Psalms is always again to Sinai, not in order to impose legalism, but to ponder *a light yoke and an easy burden* that is an alternative to the hard yoke and heavy burden of our closely held world of relentless deadlines and constant productivity. When we engage the Psalms, we go again to Sinai, where the mystery of viable life is delivered. The Psalms begin with a reference to Sinai:

Happy are those  
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
 or take the path that sinners tread,  
 or sit in the seats of scoffers;  
 but their delight is in the law of the LORD,  
 and on his law they meditate day and night.  
 1:1–2

A normed life is like a willow tree, like a banquet, like a dance, like a journey home. The norms from the mountain are given by God. They are firm and nonnegotiable. Yet they are always under interpretation and reformulation.

The foolish, unnormed life, of course, is not so. Fools never make it to Sinai; they think there is no god; they think they can do as they wish without destroying self or neighbor. But we who read the Psalms know better. The counterworld found there is not a jungle. There, might does not make right, and our life has more than a private meaning. No, in the Psalms we are lined out as our best selves:

Praise the LORD!  
 Happy are those who fear the LORD,  
 who greatly delight in his commandments.  
 Their descendants will be mighty in the land;  
 the generation of the upright will be blessed.  
 Wealth and riches are in their houses,  
 and their faithfulness endures forever.  
 They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;  
 they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.  
 It is well with those who deal generously and lend,  
 who conduct their affairs with justice.  
 For the righteous will never be moved;  
 they will be remembered forever.



They are not afraid of evil tidings;  
their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD.

112:1–7

It is the work of the Psalter to populate our world with the character of this God. Where this God governs, the world is transformed and transformable. It becomes a place of joy and duty—of joyous duty—a place of buoyancy and risk. Even so, we itch to be left in a joyless, duty-free world that is noticeably short on buoyancy and empty of serious risk. But because we have entered this counterworld, we may decide differently. The people of this counterworld of covenantal duty and joy, of buoyancy and risk, will now and in time to come be characteristically lost in wonder, love, and praise.

### Questions for Reflection

1. The reperformance of psalms in worship allows participants to articulate faith as well as articulate the complexity of life. Are there particular psalms—or verses from psalms—that have given voice to your own articulation of praise, lament, and faith as you have experienced them? What were the settings and occasions?
2. What does it mean to you that the Psalms assume and affirm that there is a God on the other end of our singing and speaking in worship and prayer? Brueggemann calls this “dialogic covenantalism.” What would you call it?
3. The Psalms give us a countercultural script, as we compare our closely held world that recognizes no god but idols (like patriotism, nationalism, capitalism, scholastic conservatism, progressivism, etc.), with the creative, covenant-making, deeply engaged God of the Psalter. What evidence do you see of a worldview “without God” in your local community? How comfortable are you with the idea of being “countercultural” as you affirm the faith of the Psalms in worship?
4. Which of the seven observations about the Psalms described on pages 13–20, and listed below, particularly resonates with you today? Which do you most need to remember? Which does your worshipping community as a whole most need to remember?

- The Earth Will Yield Its Fruit (celebrating abundance over scarcity)
- God Prepares a Table (recognizing generosity over greed)
- A Summons to Trust (trusting each other and God over self-sufficiency)
- God the Truth-Teller (speaking truth over denial)
- God the Promise-Keeper (a dream of *shalom* over despair)
- Community of Deep Memory (recalling God's past fidelity over amnesia)
- A Light Yoke and Easy Burden (following God's law over normlessness)