

From Whom  
No Secrets Are Hid

Introducing the Psalms

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*Edited by Brent A. Strawn*

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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## Author's Preface

*T*his book is not an ambitious one, and it is not meant to be. I intend it as an invitation to growth in faith, which may be useful to serious persons of faith. I hope it will lead some to a deeper sense of worship in churches that read, sing, or chant the Psalms; and I hope it will aid and abet those who practice serious evangelical spirituality. My long-term hope, beyond that, is that it may lead common church practice to greatly expand the repertoire of Psalms that are utilized in worship. I am aware of what a limited repertoire much of the church practices, not least the “liturgical churches,” in excluding much that is interesting, difficult, and poignant in the Psalms. Perhaps this book will help rectify that.

The title of the volume, *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid*, is a phrase from the standard, oft-repeated collect for purity in the Anglican tradition. I have taken up that phrase because the Psalter, taken in all its parts, is an articulation of all the secrets of the human heart and the human community, all voiced out loud in speech and in song to God amidst the community. Every person has secrets that cannot be told that must be told. Moreover (and with a glance at Faulkner), almost every community and congregation has secrets that have not yet been told that must be told in the presence of the God of all truth. The fullness of the repertoire of the Psalms reaches all the emotional extremities of ecstasy and agony, a reach that is especially urgent in a reductionist, technological society such as ours that wants to reduce emotional extremity to (at best) banal therapeutic expression (among other reductionisms). Thus I imagine that the church at worship remains an uncommon and peculiar venue where deep secrets of exuberance and dismay can be voiced, a voicing that is indispensable for the social and economic health of the body of faith and the body politic.

The Psalms as script for the telling of secrets is fully occupied by honest women and men of faith, even as it is fully occupied by the God who comes and

goes in freedom, who abides in fidelity, and who is often known to be present, by default, amidst human misery. To have this script entrusted to us is both a wonder and a huge demand. In the phrasing of James C. Scott, the Psalms constitute a kind of "hidden transcript" that bears serious subversive power for the sake of transformation. I hope that what follows here may be of some use in making this strange script freshly available for serious faith in a culture of emergency.

It will be evident that I have followed the conventional appeal to genre analysis that continues to dominate Psalm study. Beyond that usual analysis I have tried to take seriously the shrewd awareness of M. M. Bakhtin that genres are ways of coding power relationships. The various genres of the Psalms reflect shifting power relationships between God and Israel, between Israel and the "others" in their world, and between the "haves" and the "have-nots" within Israel. I have attempted to show the ways in which the several genres invite interpretive probes that have immense force for contemporary life and faith.

Chapter 2, "The Counter-World of the Psalms," was first presented to a conference on the Psalms held at Calvin Seminary and then to a meeting of the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes. Chapter 6, on Psalm 104, was first presented at a clergy conference at Lipscomb University, for which I thank David Fleer. I have included as an appendix my older essay, "The Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," first published in 1980, because it remains my signature take on the Psalms. I have not made much explicit appeal to my typology of "orientation, disorientation, new orientation" in the present essays, but it is inescapably in the background of my thinking and so it seemed to warrant inclusion.

I am, of course, beholden to many fine Psalms scholars of the present and past generations, none more so than Patrick D. Miller and his durable study, *They Cried to the Lord*. I am grateful to David Dobson, Marianne Blickenstaff, and their colleagues at Westminster John Knox Press, and to Brent A. Strawn for helping the project along in major ways.

I am delighted to dedicate this book with thanks to Philip Clary, our Organist and Music Director at St. Timothy's Episcopal Church. At St. Tim's, in good Anglican fashion, we utilize a psalm each Sunday. For that reason I am grateful for the way in which he enlivens and enriches our use of the Psalms as a script for our own secret telling. He and his wondrous choir make a decisive difference, as they skillfully and faithfully take our printed words and turn them back into truth-telling, life-disclosing music. Our shared debt to Phil and to his choir is immense.

Walter Brueggemann  
Summer 2013

# The Psalms and the Practice of Disclosure

Brent A. Strawn

The title of this volume, as Walter Brueggemann notes in his preface, comes from the *Book of Common Prayer*, which, in a prayer for purity prior to the Eucharist, extols God as the one “from whom no secrets are hid.”<sup>1</sup> This sentiment recalls another one, operative in many psychological circles today (and Brueggemann’s frequent mention of Freud in the pages that follow is appropriate and indicative at this point), which asserts that “we are only as sick as our secrets.” Combining *the liturgical epithet* with *the psychological insight* suggests that the biblical psalms are ultimately *therapeutic*: they exist for our healing and for the healing of the world, or yet further, as Brueggemann would no doubt have it, for our healing *for* the healing of the world.

The Psalms witness to a place where no secrets are hid from God, where it is, in fact, *impossible* to hide secrets from God. But the Psalms do not simply *attest* to such a place: insofar as they function as models of prayer that can be re-uttered—or, in Brueggemann’s terms, “reperformed”—the Psalms themselves *disclose* such a place. In the process of praying these ancient prayers, that is, every time we re-utter and reperform them, the Psalms realize and manifest in us who pray them full disclosure. In this way, the Psalms not only model the practice of disclosure but also become the very way we disclose everything, even and especially our deepest secrets, before God. And why

1. “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.” *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David according to the Use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 323 (Rite One); cf. also *ibid.*, 355 (Rite Two). The formulation is no doubt indebted deeply and directly to the Psalms. See, e.g., Ps. 44:21: “For he [i.e., God] knows the secrets of the heart”; cf. Pss. 38:9; 69:5; 90:8. The wicked often think God can’t see them or is somehow otherwise removed (i.e., hidden) from their deeds (see Pss. 10:11; 94:7; cf. 64:5), a point explicitly refuted in Ps. 10:14. For God’s watchful looking, see also Pss. 14:2; 33:13–15; 53:2; 102:18–20; 104:31–32; 113:5–9; cf. 80:14–15. In the New Testament, see Matt. 6:4, 6, 18; and further below.

not? This is, after all, the God “from whom no secrets are hid,” and hiding secrets, we have come to learn, makes us sick.

Of course, unlike the psychological insight, the liturgical epithet says nothing about *our disclosure* proper; it simply asserts that no secret is hidden *from God*. Nor does the epithet indicate that this disclosure is somehow or ultimately therapeutic. It is contemporary psychology that has taught us that of late, but it is an insight long anticipated by the Psalms. Indeed, it is the special gift of this ancient poetry that it not only reveals the accuracy of the liturgical epithet but also manifests the locus and practice of disclosure—*our disclosure*—and how that is for our benefit. In this way, both the liturgical epithet and the psychological insight both trace back, each in its own way, to the Psalter and its practice of disclosure.

And yet it is precisely the brutal honesty of the Psalms, their utter candor, whether in grief and sorrow (lament) or in anger and rage (imprecation), that makes so many of these texts so difficult for modern readers.<sup>2</sup> Psalmic disclosure is “too real” for many people, “too honest.” Aren’t such things best kept private, to one’s self, for the better of all concerned?

- *Not so*, says the liturgical epithet: nothing whatsoever is private before this God from whom no secrets are hid.
- *Not so*, says the psychological insight: the more secretive, the more sickly.
- *Not so*, says the Psalms in myriad ways.

A modern parallel to the power of psalmic disclosure showcases its therapeutic action and may prove especially helpful for those too easily offended by the Psalms’ brutal and beautiful candor:

In November 2004, Frank Warren started the PostSecret Project. He randomly distributed 3,000 self-addressed postcards inviting people to send him a secret anonymously. He has been collecting postcards ever since with the total now numbering well over 500,000. Warren has published thousands of these postcards on his website, [www.postsecret.com](http://www.postsecret.com), which has been visited by more than a quarter of a billion people. He has also produced five printed books, and some of the cards have been used in art exhibits and traveling shows, especially on college campuses.<sup>3</sup>

2. Praise, too, can be an embarrassment for modern readers, for a number of reasons, but the problems at this point have less to do, it seems to me, with honesty than with theology, that is, the doctrine of God: God’s existence, God’s action, and so forth, which make God praiseworthy.

3. Frank Warren, *PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives* (New York: Regan, 2005); idem, *My Secret: A PostSecret Book* (New York: Regan, 2006); idem, *A Lifetime of Secrets: A PostSecret Book* (New York: William Morrow, 2007); idem, *The Secret Lives of Men and Women: A Post-Secret Book* (New York: William Morrow, 2007); and idem, *PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death, and*

The “PostSecrets” themselves are typically stunning combinations of images and words that reveal their secrets, tell their stories, and make their confessions in arresting ways that have to be seen to be fully appreciated and that have clearly resonated with millions of viewers. A few word-images will not do justice to the range of the secrets Warren has collected, but the following may be taken as suggestive if not representative.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the secrets concern relationships, such as *marriage*,

- “I often wonder what it would have been like if I chose the ‘other man’ instead of my husband” (on a picture of a couple holding hands)
- “If I ever win . . . The first thing I’ll do—is meet with a *divorce* lawyer” (on a lotto ticket receipt)

or *children*,

- “I will never forgive myself for letting my girlfriend get an abortion” (on the famous photograph of Nguyen Ngoc Loan shooting the Vietcong operative Nguyen Van Lem in the head but with the head replaced by a cartoon baby face with big blue eyes, chubby cheeks, a smile, and wisps of blond hair)
- “I no longer feel the awkward obligation to fill silent spaces with mindless self-centered chatter” (on a picture of a baby in a neo-natal intensive care unit)
- “My entire life has been a lie by omission” (on a picture of an ultrasound on which is written “It’s not his baby”).

Others concern *the self*, which is never far removed from other relationships,

- “Everyday on my way to work, I contemplate driving past it, and never coming back” (on a picture of a traffic jam)
- “I am a 40 year old child” (on a picture of a child’s hand)
- “I hope he doesn’t turn out like me” (on a picture of a child’s face with his eyes covered with writing)
- “Sometimes I wish I could use the techniques of a Mafia Godfather in my personal & professional life” (on a picture of mobsters shooting)
- “To the class of 1977, I still HATE you ALL” (on a picture of a high school)
- “I have two master’s degrees and a doctorate . . . but I still feel like a

*God* (New York: William Morrow, 2009). The project was also featured in the video for the song “Dirty Little Secret,” by the band The All-American Rejects, from their album *Move Along* (2005).

4. All of the following come from Warren, *The Secret Lives of Men and Women*, which does not use page numbers.



Failure” (with F written in red ink, on a picture of a cap, tassel, and diploma)

even *self-harm* and *suicide*,

- “When I write a To-Do list . . . I write ‘Starve Yourself’ but i abbreviate it S.Y. so no one knows” (written on a chalkboard)
- “I’ve wanted to die for 36 years . . . but I know I’ll spend eternity in Hell” (written on flames)
- “I saved the life of someone I truly HATE. Nobody will know that it was ME” (on a picture of pill capsules)
- “save\_me” (written, letter-by-letter, on a picture of hundreds of pink pills)
- “Every day I contemplate suicide and if you knew why, you’d want me dead too.”

And many of the secrets concern *God* and *religion*:

- “I don’t know how to go back to God. . . . And I want to more than anything else in the world . . .” (with a picture of praying hands)
- “If my family found out . . . they would disown me” (on a picture of a sheep with a tag in the ear reading “ATHEIST”)
- “I’ve prayed to God every night of my 25 years of marriage and my atheist husband has absolutely no idea!” (with a picture of praying hands)
- “I hate it when people say prayer works because it didn’t when I was begging God to save my baby’s life” (written on an otherwise blank white card)
- “When I was 16 I had an abortion.  
When I was 33 I had a miscarriage.  
I think God was punishing me” (on a picture with a baby sleeping).

And, as a final example that may be especially apropos for some readers of the present book:

- “Some days, it feels more like a Noose!!” (on a close-up picture of a clerical collar)

These are astounding secrets to be sure, but equally astonishing is how the PostSecret phenomenon has caught on, why it has caught on, and how both Warren and others have interpreted its remarkable popularity. Five things deserve mention, especially with an eye toward the therapeutic action of psalmic disclosure.

1. First, there is the matter of (*comm*)unity: somehow, someday, people feel united by these secrets and their revelation. Warren himself has commented that the confession found in these postcards “helps reveal our hidden unity,”<sup>5</sup> and the final two pages of *The Secret Lives of Men and Women* capture the sentiment. Four images of a man are depicted—first in a suit and tie, then bare, then as an x-ray image, and then gone. On each image is written, respectively: “Separated by Routine,” “We are all,” “Mourning in parallel form,” “The same silent tragedies.” The notion of “parallel mourning” is not lost on observers, as revealed in the following comment from a British reader:

Some of the secrets really cause me to sit back and say a quick prayer for whoever wrote them. . . . Some of the secrets make me think: “I wonder if so and so posted that secret,” and some of the secrets make me think: “WOW! I’m not alone.”<sup>6</sup>

2. People feel unified and not alone perhaps, at least in part, because of a second observation: sharing secrets takes *courage* and, in turn, telling secrets *en-courages*—it can give others the courage to share their own stories that often “begin with a secret and end with hope.”<sup>7</sup> It may be the very telling of a secret, in the beginning, that facilitates the ending in hope. Whatever the case, the PostSecret Project is profoundly personal for Warren, and precisely on this score: “[W]hen their postcards found me,” he writes, “I was able to find the courage to identify my secret and share it too.”<sup>8</sup> And in *A Lifetime of Secrets*, Warren notes he is not the only one: “I have witnessed many times how the courage of sharing a secret can be contagious.”<sup>9</sup> The PostSecrets, like the Psalms, are acts that are “reperformable.”<sup>10</sup>

3. A third item is the potential for *change*: disclosing secrets can change people—both the secret tellers themselves and, not infrequently, others who see and read these secrets, even long after the fact. Sometimes the change is quite literally lifesaving, as is evidenced by the relationship between

5. Warren, *PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death, and God*, vii.

6. Warren, *The Secret Lives of Men and Women*, n.p.

7. Warren, “Introduction,” in *My Secret*, n.p.

8. Warren, *PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives*, 3.

9. Warren, “Introduction,” in *A Lifetime of Secrets*, n.p. Cf. *The Secret Lives of Men and Women*, where, in response to the question, “What have you learned from all the secrets you have seen?” Warren states: “Courage can be more important than training or technique in creating meaningful art” (n.p.).

10. Warren’s replies to the question, “Do you think all the secrets are true?” are instructive at this point. He tells the story of someone who sent in a faked secret that was partially lost in the mail from damage. After the partial form was posted, the original author wrote Warren and said “The new altered meaning of the secret on the card is true to me.” Warren concludes, “I think the postcards work like art. So to ask me if the postcards are true or false is like asking if a painting or sculpture in a museum is fiction or nonfiction” (*The Secret Lives of Men and Women*, n.p.).

the PostSecret Project and suicide prevention services such as 1-800-SUICIDE.<sup>11</sup> The change that occurs is not always a matter of life-and-death but is no less salvific, despite that. Consider the following testimonies from various observers from around the United States:

- To the person who mailed the postcard that read, “The thing I hate most about myself is that I’m too lazy to change the things I hate,” I read your secret and cried. I decided to look at myself and see what my problem was. More than being lazy, I realized it was about fear. I was afraid of trying my hardest and still not succeeding. But then I realized I was already living my worst case scenario by not even attempting to move forward. Today, I decided fear and laziness would not rule my life. I hope knowing you helped someone will help you too. —New Mexico
- Every single person has at least one secret that would break your heart. If we could just remember this, I think there would be a lot more compassion and tolerance in the world. —Mississippi
- On Thursday, I enjoyed dropping my postcard into the post office box and watching it disappear. My secret does not own me anymore. I don’t need revenge. —California.<sup>12</sup>

On one of the postcards found in *A Lifetime of Secrets*, which shows two women dancing on a rock jutting out over a large canyon, the following is written:

i used to write my secrets on postcards  
they were never posted

now i tell them to real people that know and care about me

thanks, postsecret  
and goodbye.<sup>13</sup>

“Goodbye,” because PostSecret is no longer needed. A real, life-altering change has occurred . . . and for the good.

This possibility of real change that can emerge from secret telling is nicely captured in a response Warren gave to the question, “Do you have a favorite secret?”:

Yes, but I never had a chance to see it. I learned about it in an email that read, in part, *I thought long and hard about how I wanted to word my secret and I searched for the perfect postcard to display it on. After I had created my postcard I stepped back to admire my handiwork. Instead of feeling*

11. See Reese Butler’s foreword in *My Secret*.

12. Warren, *The Secret Lives of Men and Women*, n.p.

13. Warren, *A Lifetime of Secrets*, n.p.

*relieved that I had finally got my secret out, I felt terrible instead. It was right then that I decided that I didn't want to be the person with that secret any longer. I ripped up my postcard and I decided to start making some changes in my life to become a new and better person.*<sup>14</sup>

4. Much more could and should be said about the preceding points, but not to be missed amid it all is a fourth item: the many connections between the PostSecret phenomenon and truths known well from modern psychology. Here the work of James W. Pennebaker deserves special mention, especially his classic book, *Opening Up*.<sup>15</sup> Pennebaker has demonstrated that honest disclosure, especially in writing, has very real benefits for physical and mental health. Putting things, especially traumatic things, into language can affect immune function in beneficial ways, whereas the opposite scenario also obtains. Inhibition is hard work, and that work eventually takes its toll on the body's defenses. Keeping secrets, that is, not only prevents one from processing them (and, in some cases, the associated trauma), it also can reveal itself in physical maladies. "In short," Pennebaker writes, "excessive holding back of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can place people at risk for both major and minor diseases."<sup>16</sup> He continues:

Whereas inhibition is potentially harmful, confronting our deepest thoughts and feelings can have remarkable short- and long-term health

14. Warren, *Secret Lives of Men and Women*, n.p. (emphasis original).

15. James W. Pennebaker, *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Confiding in Others* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1990; revised edition: New York: Guilford Press, 1997); idem, "Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process," *Psychological Science* 8 (1997): 162–66; idem, "The Effects of Traumatic Disclosure on Physical and Mental Health: The Values of Writing and Talking about Upsetting Events," *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health* 1 (1999): 9–18; idem, "Telling Stories: The Health Benefits of Narrative," *Literature and Medicine* 19 (2000): 3–18; idem, "The Social, Linguistic, and Health Consequences of Emotional Disclosure," in *Social Psychological Foundations of Health and Illness* (eds. J. Suls and K. A. Wallston; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 288–313. See also his many multiauthored works: for example, J. W. Pennebaker and R. C. O'Heeron, "Confiding in Others and Illness Rates among Spouses of Suicide and Accidental Death," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 93 (1984): 473–76; J. W. Pennebaker, C. F. Hughes, and R. C. O'Heeron, "The Psychophysiology of Confession: Linking Inhibitory and Psychosomatic Processes," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52 (1987): 781–93; J. W. Pennebaker and J. R. Susman, "Disclosure of Traumas and Psychosomatic Processes," *Social Science and Medicine* 26 (1988): 327–32; L. VandeCreek, M.-D. Janus, J. W. Pennebaker, and B. Binou, "Praying about Difficult Experiences as Self-Disclosure to God," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 12 (2002): 29–39; E. M. Gortner, S. S. Rude, and J. W. Pennebaker, "Benefits of Expressive Writing in Lowering Rumination and Depressive Symptoms," *Behavior Therapy* 37 (2006): 292–303; and J. W. Pennebaker and C. K. Chung, "Expressive Writing, Emotional Upheavals, and Health," in *Foundations of Health Psychology* (eds. H. Friedman and R. Silver; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 263–84. These and other publications can be found on Pennebaker's website: <http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/homepage/faculty/pennebaker/home2000/jwphome.htm> (accessed July 2, 2013).

16. Pennebaker, *Opening Up*, 14. The work of Alice Miller, *The Body Never Lies: The Lingering Effects of Hurtful Parenting* (New York: Norton, 2006) is also worth mentioning at this point.

benefits. Confession, whether by writing or talking, can neutralize many of the problems of inhibition. Further, writing or talking about upsetting things can influence our basic values, our daily thinking patterns, and our feelings about ourselves. In short, there appears to be something akin to an urge to confess. Not disclosing our thoughts and feelings can be unhealthy. Divulging them can be healthy.<sup>17</sup>

An echo (or is it an anticipation?) of Pennebaker's insight and honesty-health dynamic is found in Psalm 32:

When I kept quiet, my bones wore out;  
I was groaning all day long—  
every day, every night!—

because your hand was heavy upon me.  
My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought.

So I admitted my sin to you;  
I didn't conceal my guilt.

"I'll confess my sins to the LORD," is what I said.  
Then you removed the guilt of my sin.

That's why all the faithful should pray to you during troubled times,  
so that a great flood of water won't reach them.

You are my secret hideout!  
You protect me from trouble.  
You surround me with songs of rescue!

(Ps. 32:4–7 CEB)

The therapeutic aspects of truth telling are clearly not lost on Warren's PostSecret Project, even if he doesn't discuss the psychosomatic details as do Pennebaker and the psalmist. Already in her foreword to the very first PostSecret book, Anne C. Fisher, a psychologist, noted the similarities between Warren's work and psychotherapy:

[T]he prominent themes in PostSecret mirror some of the reasons people are drawn to psychotherapy: seeking relief from suffering; sharing painful experiences (especially concerning difficulties in relationships or feelings of isolation); expressing shame and anxiety about aspects of self that are difficult to face; and admitting one's impulses, fears, and fantasies. . . . Both in psychotherapy and in PostSecret, the goal is to bring experience

17. Pennebaker, *Opening Up*, 14.

to conscious awareness and to express what is deepest inside and not have it be the end of the world. The goal is to make inner experience concrete by placing it outside the self. This exercise gives us the potential and the opportunity for self-reflection, for self-acceptance, for increased understanding about the self, and for healing and personal growth.<sup>18</sup>

There are differences to be sure, but the fundamental dynamics transcend those:

PostSecret is even briefer than the briefest of psychotherapies. The healing experience in PostSecret is bite-size, manageable. One postcard, one shared aspect of self, the secret, shared in a structured way, shared as part of an art project that may slip quietly under the radar of the psychological defenses. Release the secret onto the card, then release the card to Frank by mailing it, and notice what happens inside.<sup>19</sup>

Warren has put the matter much more briefly in his ultra-short epilogue to the same volume: “I like to believe that whenever a painful secret ends its trip to my mailbox, a much longer personal journey of healing is beginning—for all of us.”<sup>20</sup>

5. A final observation is that confessing secrets, telling the truth, often has the aura of the sacred about it. In *PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death, and God*, Warren states that some of the postcards “are invested with painstaking detail and look like sacred objects, perhaps offering a *kind of prayer*,” and he includes, in his acknowledgments, special thanks to his mail carrier, Kathy, “who has faithfully delivered hundreds of thousands of postcards to my mailbox with kindness and care, *as if the secrets were sacred*.”<sup>21</sup>

Those of us attuned to the Psalms and their practice of disclosure would no doubt readily affirm that the PostSecrets are indeed a kind of prayer, and that, as a result, yes, they are sacred, despite the fact that most of them are not couched in the religious language of prayer proper. But does that even matter? The liturgical epithet speaks only of the God who sees all secrets; the religious orientation (or lack thereof) goes unmentioned and seems quite irrelevant. Whether the secret teller is religious or not, the secrets are still and nevertheless known by the Lord.

18. Anne C. Fisher, “The Most Trusted Stranger in America,” in Warren, *PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives*, viii–ix.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Warren, *PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives*, 276.

21. Warren, *PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death, and God*, 275; and *ibid.*, vii, respectively (my emphases). Cf. *The Secret Lives of Men and Women*, where Warren writes: “In some case, the postcards are so soulful and painstakingly crafted that the cards might hold deep symbolic value to the sender, *perhaps a search for grace*” (n.p.; my emphasis).

This emphasis on the Secret-Knower in both the liturgical epithet and the Psalms themselves is an element that goes largely unappreciated in Post-Secret and in so much psychology. But, lest we be overly dichotomous in our thinking at this point, the words of Fisher, about the psychodynamics of PostSecret, are instructive:

At the foundation of psychotherapy is relationship. . . . It is about one human being expressing authentic caring and concern for another, offering comfort, witness, acceptance, assistance, and hope. When you send the postcard to Frank, he is on the other end to receive it. The same person who has offered us an opportunity to share has taken an interest in us and is there for us, unconditionally.<sup>22</sup>

Now, despite all his good work, it is hard to believe that Warren loves all the secret tellers unconditionally. Even so, Fisher's comment about a benevolent, nonanxious presence amid the deepest secrets of our lives is a crucial one.

- And here, at exactly this point, as good and as poignant as PostSecret and psychology are, they are not yet "good enough."
- And here, at exactly this point, we may return to the Psalms and the liturgical epithet and the God from whom no secrets are hid.

We may be only as sick as our secrets, such that we simply have to disclose them, but, according to the Psalms, the psychological insight is insufficient without the liturgical epithet. The stand-in provided by Warren or by a good therapist is good as far as it goes. And sometimes "as far as it goes" is quite far indeed, and thus *very* good; the stand-in, in such best-case scenarios, might even be seen as God's representative, co-facilitating God's healing. But the best-case scenario also admits of others, and we must acknowledge that sometimes the stand-in does not go nearly far enough, because, even at its best, the stand-in is only *re-presentative* of God. The Psalms, on the other hand, realize and manifest—disclose—a place where our secrets are "posted," where they can unify us, encourage us, change us, and heal us; but

22. Fisher, "The Most Trusted Stranger in America," ix. Elsewhere, in response to the question, "Why do you think people continue to mail their secrets to you?" Warren has written: "I believe the motives are as raw and complicated as the secrets themselves. . . . I have tried to create a nonjudgmental 'place' where every secret is treated respectfully. In this safe environment where there is no social cost for exposing a guarded secret to millions, it might be easier for someone to confess an embarrassing story, hidden act of kindness, or sexual taboo. . . . People have told me that facing their secret on a postcard and releasing it to a stranger have allowed them to uncover passions, experiences, hopes, regrets, and fears that have been too painful to otherwise acknowledge" (*The Secret Lives of Men and Women*, n.p.).

they also do *more* than all that by doing all of it *before God*. Psalmic disclosure, that is, does not simply have *an aura* of the sacred about it, nor is it *a kind* of prayer; it is done in the very presence of the Sacred Itself, through the very patterns of prayer proper. The Psalms realize, manifest, and disclose not only *the place* where no secrets are hid but *the God* from whom they cannot be hidden.

And so, despite the many helpful similarities among PostSecret, psychology, and the Psalms, and the helpful insights we can glean from PostSecret and psychology about the Psalms and the practice of disclosure, we also see that secret telling a la PostSecret or psychotherapy isn't yet quite enough—not according to the liturgical epithet or the Psalms themselves. There is something more than just expressing our secrets so that we are no longer sick *with* them or sick *of* them. There is *Someone* more—there is this Other, this God “from whom no secrets are hid.”

The fact that it is God who hears these secrets makes their telling that much more important, that much more fraught, that much more risky and dangerous. The divine presence is not always nonanxious, benevolent, and nonjudgmental!<sup>23</sup> And so, telling secrets in such a presence makes disclosure that much more difficult. How far can we go? How much is permissible? The Psalms suggest that we can go *the whole way*, that it is *all permissible*: the praise, yes, but also the grief, the sorrow, the anger, the rage, the cursing. The Psalms disclose all that, and, in their reperformance, manifest it. They are the locus and script *of* and *for* our full disclosure before God.

To return to an earlier point, the full range of psalmic disclosure, *our* disclosure, may be possible because (somewhat ironically) the liturgical epithet says nothing about our disclosure at all. It simply asserts that no secret is hidden from God. The secret, however profound or trivial, is of no matter; it is *known*. And whether the secret is told, disclosed by us in speech or writing or prayer, is also of limited significance: according to the liturgical epithet, the secret is disclosed *invariably and as a matter of course* because no secrets are hid from God.

The fact that the secrets are already known, already “out there,” makes their telling even more significant and more therapeutic, which is of course the psychological insight provided by PostSecret, Pennebaker, and so many others. Secrets, we now know, are always on their way to going public, always in the process of coming to light. Indeed, *vis-à-vis* God, there is no “process of coming to light” at all. The secrets are already revealed! So it is that a large host of our problems seem to stem directly from trying to stop a process that

23. See several of the texts cited in note 1 above.



is as inevitable as it is existential—and *theological*. The secrets are anything but secret in the light of God. Why then do we hide them? And at what cost?<sup>24</sup>

“We are only as sick as our secrets”—so says the psychological insight, which means that we are only as healthy as our honest disclosure. On the one hand, these secrets are always on their way to revealing themselves, even against our wills and best efforts; on the other hand, the secrets are so deep, often so painful and traumatic, that we continue to fight against their revelation, trying to hide them lest they be seen by others and by God. But we should know better, from both the Psalms and from psychology: the art of disclosure is good for our souls and good for our *psyches*. And we should also know, especially from the Psalms if not also from elsewhere, that God is trustworthy with our secrets—not that they will not come to light, which they most certainly will (see Ps. 90:8; Matt. 10:26; Mark 4:22; Luke 8:17; 12:2; Rom. 2:16), but rather that in their coming to light God may be trusted with them and with our healing.

In his last *PostSecret* book, Warren testifies to the power of secret telling:

I’ve seen secrets bring to life a hidden world that can inspire and comfort.  
I’ve seen how the very act of sharing a secret can make it true.  
I’ve seen how thousands of secrets, like different verses to the same song,  
sing of the search for that one special person we can tell all our secrets to.  
I have seen how a collection of earnest secrets can challenge each of us to  
liberate our own.<sup>25</sup>

In the remarkable chapters that follow, Walter Brueggemann, in his inimitable way, reveals how the Psalms and their practice of disclosure do all the above for us now . . . and yet still even more because of “that one special person we can tell all our secrets to,” but who knows them already long before that.

24. See Pennebaker, *Opening Up*, passim for the toll inhibition takes. For the Psalms, see especially chapters 2 and 8 below, as well as Brueggemann’s classic essay, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *JSOT* 36 (1986): 57–71.

25. Warren, “Introduction,” in *PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death, and God*, 2.

# Abbreviations

BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft von Alten und Neuen Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CEB	Common English Bible
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
Tbü	Theologische Bücherei
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

# Introduction to the Book of Psalms

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*. Thus the Psalms offer expressions of praise and prayer that have been found, over the 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 also been reperformed as instruction, as the young have been socialized and inculcated into the life-world 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, a relationship that refuses both parties autonomy without responsible connection and subservient submission yet without defining self-assertion. Thus the practice of the Psalter protects the community from both religious temptations of negating the reality of God or 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 Ps. 146:3–9, the capacity of YHWH to enact social transformations is contrasted with the “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, the blind, the 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 wanes, and the exuberance of praise becomes more vigorous and bold. 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 this articulation. 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 liturgical 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:

#### 4 From Whom No Secrets Are Hid

I cry aloud,  
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.

(Ps. 77:1–3)

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.

#### Lament and Praise Together

These two comprehensive genres that reach the emotional extremities of life do not account for all the Psalms. But a very large part of the Psalter is subsumed in these two genres. Thus the poetry that *cedes self* to God and that *claims self* over against God bespeaks the *intensely dialogical quality* of Israel’s faith. The hymns by themselves may lead to an excessive abandonment of self in exuberance. The forcefulness of laments by itself may lead to an unhealthy preoccupation with self. It is, however, the give and take of praise and lament, of ceding and claiming, that is variously submissive and demanding that keeps the faith of Israel open and dynamic. Such a faith is quite in contrast both to religion that is rigorously moralistic, on the one hand, or that is narcissistically engaged only with one’s own “spirituality,” on the other. The Psalms reject and resist that kind of moralism and that kind of narcissism as distorting temptations.

#### 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 the 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 Mt. 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?

(Ps. 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 the 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 (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 was 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. There can be no doubt that as the church took over the Psalter for its own use in worship and instruction, it has re-read 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 counter-cultural 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.