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## GENRE, THEOLOGY, AND THE GOD OF THE PSALMS

Rolf Jacobson

### Introduction: Concerning a Theology of the Psalms

In 1975 Nils A. Dahl penned an essay titled, “The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology.”<sup>1</sup> According to Dahl, the neglected factor in New Testament theology was God. Dahl noted how the discipline of New Testament theology had evolved to the point where in 1975 it did “not speak about God but about the way in which the New Testament authors talk about God; its discourse about God is indirect.”<sup>2</sup> While noting that “indirect” theological discourse has value, Dahl nevertheless lamented that “the majority of New Testament scholars have not only eliminated direct references to God from their works but have also neglected detailed and comprehensive investigation of statements about God.”<sup>3</sup> Using Dahl’s essay as a point of departure, I maintain that the proper subject of theology is God. More specifically, the subject of theology is *the person of God*, and *the primary source for Christian theology is the biblical text*. It follows, then, that the proper subject of the theology of the psalms is the God of the psalms, and the primary source for such a theology is the psalms’ statement *about God* and *to God*. Because that task exceeds the scope of any one essay, the purpose of this chapter is to make two basic assertions—as test cases—about the person of the God whom the psalms explicitly and implicitly describe, based on the psalms as a whole, but

<sup>1</sup> Nils A. Dahl, “The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology,” in *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine*, ed. Donald H. Juel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 153–63. Originally in *Reflections* 75 (1975): 5–8.

<sup>2</sup> Dahl, “Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology,” 153.

<sup>3</sup> Dahl, “Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology,” 154.

more specifically based on the genres of the prayers for help and the royal psalms. To couch the purpose of this essay in terms of the title of this volume, this essay offers basic reflections about what sort of God it is to whom the prayers for help and royal psalms bear witness.

### *The Possibility of a Theology of the Psalms*

Prior to turning to that task, it should be acknowledged that some scholars reject the idea of a theology of the psalms. They do so primarily on the conviction that the Psalter is a collection of 150 poems that are too diverse to be meaningful source material for any systematizing theology. It is true that the 150 psalms of the Hebrew Psalter are diverse. They were not written by one author, or penned during one historical epoch, or gathered together by one school of thought, in one time and place. The poems do not share a singular genre; the word “psalm” itself does not denote any specific literary genre but rather is a general term referring to “any sacred song” or “any song or ode of a sacred or serious character.”<sup>4</sup> Among those who reject the idea of a theology of the psalms, Erhard Gerstenberger, for example, has argued that “the Psalter is so vast in its theological dimensions that any systemizing effort must fall short.”<sup>5</sup> Gerstenberger has preferred to speak of “theologies in the book of psalms,” because “the plurality of divine functions in the emerging Jewish community points to a segmentation of theology in different discourses. . . . The Book of Psalms neither diachronically nor synchronically represents a uniform theology. To the contrary, it exhibits multilayered conceptions of God.”<sup>6</sup>

I believe, however, that a theology of the psalms is both a plausible and a fruitful task. The primary reason for this is simple. *The Psalter is a collection of poetry with a common subject: God.* More specifically, the Psalter is a collection of 150 poems that wrestle with the problems and promises of life in relationship with YHWH, the God of Israel. I have found the metaphor of a mosaic a helpful way of conceiving of the task of approaching a theology of the psalms.<sup>7</sup> The individual stones of a mosaic are unique pieces of rock, glass, or

<sup>4</sup> “Psalm,” in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2344.

<sup>5</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1, with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, FOTL 14 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger, “Theologies in the Book of Psalms,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 603–25, 622.

<sup>7</sup> My past efforts at articulating a theology of the psalms have focused on the basic character of the God to which the psalms, as a whole, bear witness. “‘The Faithfulness of the Lord Endures Forever’: The Central Theological Witness of the Psalter,” in *Soundings in the*

pottery. As such, they represent diverse and disparate individual elements. But collected, arranged, and viewed together, the individual elements contribute to a coherent whole. In a similar fashion, the individual poems of the Psalter are unique literary elements that are homogeneous in genre, theological perspective, or worldview. But, as is almost universally recognized in psalms scholarship, the psalms have been *intentionally* collected and arranged.<sup>8</sup> In the process of collecting and arranging the psalms, it is almost certain that the psalms underwent some degree of editing.<sup>9</sup> The “mosaic” that results from the intentional arrangement of the poems that make up the Psalter is a legitimate source for investigating the theology of the psalms.

### *Genre and a Theology of the Psalms*

Although space here does not permit a systematic exploration of method, one basic comment regarding method is necessary. The varying genres one encounters in the Psalter need to be considered as one moves from seeking to understand the poems themselves toward drawing theological conclusions. Terence Fretheim points out, “Genre determination will commonly have much to do with how one understands and explicates a text, including its theology.”<sup>10</sup> Fretheim draws particular attention in this regard to the lament psalms:

Seeing God depicted as the addressee in the lament psalms will say something very important about that God; God is one who is easily and forthrightly addressed, and has entered into an open and dialogical relationship with those who pray such prayers. At the same time, one would have to

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*Theology of the Psalms*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 117–37; ch. 6 in *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement*, with Karl N. Jacobson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 149–76; “Christian Theology of the Psalms,” in *Oxford Handbook on the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 499–512.

<sup>8</sup> See Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985); J. Clinton McCann, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Erich Zenger, ed., *The Composition of the Book of Psalms: The Proceedings of the Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense LVII*, BETL 238 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010). The latter volume contains the most plausible argument regarding who collected the psalms and where and roughly when they were collected; see Susan E. Gillingham, “The Levitical Singers and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter,” in *Composition of the Book of Psalms*, 91–123.

<sup>9</sup> To cite just one example, Scott R. A. Starbuck, citing the fact that every extrabiblical royal psalm extant explicitly names particular kings, has convincingly made the case that the so-called royal psalms were edited to remove the names of particular kings (such as, perhaps, Hezekiah or Josiah) (*Court Oracles in the Psalms: The So-Called Royal Psalms in their Ancient Near-Eastern Context*, SBLDS 172 [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999]).

<sup>10</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk,” *HBT* 10 (1988): 47–70, 57.

consider whether the severities of the suffering situation prompted a speaking of God that is theologically imprecise, albeit very important.<sup>11</sup>

For example, in the lament psalms the psalmist can be heard accusing God through questions and assertions. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps 13:1a).<sup>12</sup> "You have rejected us and debased us. . . . You have sold your people for a trifle" (Ps 44:9a, 12a). "You have renounced the covenant with your servant" (Ps 89:39a). Is one to move from these complaints to normative conclusions that God forgets people, or rejects them, or sells them, or renounces covenantal relationships? The interpreter will have to account for contours and expectations of poetry genres as one investigates the psalms' statements about God.

This chapter does not attempt to be comprehensive in any sense.<sup>13</sup> As a test case for doing theological work based on the psalms, it will consider two genres of the Psalter with attention on one theological issue in each genre. First, the essay will consider the prayers for help and the theological issue of God's passibility and impassibility. Second, the essay will explore the royal psalms and the concept of divine election. The two forms are different types of genre. The prayer for help is properly a "form"—the various prayers for help exhibit common literary elements. The royal psalms, however, are less properly called a "form"—what they share in common are not literary elements but a subject: the human king.<sup>14</sup>

### The Prayer for Help and the Passibility and Impassibility of God

In his important essay "The Suffering of God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," Ronald Goetz summed up what seems to be a recent consensus among theologians: "The age-old dogma that God is impassible and immutable, incapable

<sup>11</sup> Fretheim, "Repentance of God."

<sup>12</sup> Scripture translations are from the NRSV.

<sup>13</sup> I intend to take up a fuller discussion on the theology of the psalms in a volume to appear in the Cambridge University Press Old Testament Theology series edited by Brent Strawn and Patrick Miller.

<sup>14</sup> A methodological word concerning the unity and diversity of the psalms: As noted above in the discussion of Gerstenberger, some interpreters regard the diversity of the psalms as limiting and even eliminating their usefulness as a source for normative theological reflection. While I differ with regard to that conclusion, the challenge that the diversity of the psalms presents to theological reflection must be addressed. Using Dahl again as a point of departure, a more comprehensive theological reflection on the Psalter would have to explicitly "take due account both of the unity and of the variety [of the psalms], whether the order of presentation is thematic or treats the individual writings" (Dahl, "Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology," 158).

of suffering, is for many no longer tenable. The ancient theopaschite heresy that God suffers has, in fact, become the new orthodoxy.<sup>15</sup> Goetz ascribes this “new orthodoxy” to Barth, Bonhoeffer, Brunner, Cobb, Cone (“and liberation theologians generally”), Küng, Moltmann, Ruether (“and feminist theologians generally”), and Reinhold Niebuhr. Among Old Testament theologians, one would surely include Terence Fretheim, Walter Brueggemann, Patrick Miller, Kathleen O’Connor, Dennis Olson, and others. Goetz quotes Daniel Day Williams as describing the new orthodoxy as a “structural shift in the Christian mind.”<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to the question of impassibility, the God of the psalms can be described as both impassible and immutable in terms of God’s being, God’s essential character, and God’s election of Israel. But the genre of the prayer for help suggests that God is not absolutely impassible. The prayers for help imply that God is passible and mutable in God’s temporal relationship both to Israel and to individual Israelites. The psalms at many places affirm the impassibility of God’s essential character. The most basic and common confession concerning God’s immutability in the psalms is the creed-like confession regarding the Lord that “his steadfast love endures forever” (כִּי לְעוֹלָם וְחֶסֶד; 106:1). The Lord’s existence is also “forever” (לְעוֹלָם יְהוָה; 119:89). Similarly, regarding God’s character, the psalms confess that “the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever” (אֱמֶת־יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם; 117:2; cf. 146:6) and regarding God’s nature that the Lord is blessed forever (בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם; 89:53). Finally, concerning the Lord’s sovereign reign over creation, “the Lord sits enthroned forever” (וַיְהוֶה לְעוֹלָם יֵשֵׁב; 9:8, similarly 29:10; 78:69; 102:13). Because God has imbued both the covenant with Israel and the divine word with God’s unchanging character, the covenant and the word likewise are immutable, according to the Psalter. Concerning the covenant, the psalmist confesses, “He is mindful of his covenant forever” (זָכַר לְעוֹלָם בְּרִיתוֹ; 105:8; cf. 115:8; 12:7). Concerning the word, the psalmist writes, “Your righteous decrees are eternal” (צְדֻקַּת עֲדוּתֶיךָ לְעוֹלָם; 119:144; cf. 33:11). In terms of God’s person and character and the permanence of the divine election of Israel and the divine word, the God of the Psalter is immutable.

But in terms of God’s particular actions concerning Israel and individual Israelites, a careful consideration of the Psalter suggests that the God of the psalms is far from impassible. To the contrary, the Psalter’s prayers

<sup>15</sup> Ronald Goetz, “The Suffering of God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *Christian Century* 103 (1986): 13.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Day Williams, *What Present-Day Theologians are Thinking* (Harper & Row, 1959), 138. Cited in Goetz, “Suffering of God,” 13.

for help—both in their generic form as prayer and in their explicit cries to God—presume a God who is passible.<sup>17</sup>

The genre of the prayer for help itself presumes that God is passible.<sup>18</sup> If one understands prayer generically as “a plea to God for help”<sup>19</sup> and recognizes that the overwhelming majority of psalms either *are prayers, include elements of prayer, or report past prayers*, then one is led to inquire what sort of God is implied by the act of crying to God for help. What is strange, however, is how few psalms scholars have pursued this line of inquiry into God’s person.<sup>20</sup>

To put the matter as directly as possible, *the many passages in which the psalmists beg God to act imply a view of a God who both can and will change*. Far from the “unmoved mover” of Aristotelian metaphysics, the God of the Psalter not only *can be moved*, the God of the Psalter delights in being moved and appears eager to do so. The cries in the psalms that seek God’s attention, the cries that seek explicit action from God, and the motivating-and-urging clauses that offer reasons for God to act—all of these imply God’s passibility.

### *Cries for Attention*

One of the aspects of the prayers for help that is often overlooked is that the psalmists so often seek, for lack of a better phrase, to get God’s attention. The psalms include, and often begin with, cries for God to attend: “give ear” (אָזַן; 5:1; 17:1, 5; etc.), “consider” (בִּיַן; 5:1), “listen” (קָשַׁב; 5:2; 17:1; 55:3; etc.), “turn” (שׁוּב; 6:4),<sup>21</sup> “regard” (נָבַט; 13:3; 80:14; etc.), “hear” (שָׁמַע; 39:11; 61:1; etc.), “answer” (עָנָה; 4:1; 17:6; etc.), and “see” (רָאָה; 9:13; 25:18; etc.). These cries for God to attend call for theological reflection. This reflection, as noted above, should account both for the genre in which they occur and the metaphorical nature of the language. The cries need not be taken liter-

<sup>17</sup> Note that psalms of thanksgiving also presume a passible God, since the literary elements of those songs include the description of a past crisis, the description of the call to God, and the description of the help received.

<sup>18</sup> This is the case unless one posits strong notions of both divine omniscience and providence. According to this logic, one posits that God knew before time what prayers a given sufferer might pray in a given circumstance and therefore foreordained what would be.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 55.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g. *They Cried to the Lord*, 55–134, where Miller delves deeply into the theology of biblical prayer without ever landing on the question of God’s supposed impassibility or immutability. Perhaps the reason for this is that, as with most interpreters, Miller’s inquiry is guided by the forms of the psalms (e.g., prayer, praise, trust). Thus, Miller speaks in depth of the theology of prayer and trust and praise but offers little about the person of God. In a subsection on “God’s nature and character” in the psalms’ motivational clauses (117–22), Miller never touches on the question of God’s passibility.

<sup>21</sup> The verb שׁוּב in some places implies a particular action from God (cf. 28:4), but in others, such as 6:4, implies a turn to “attend” or “hear.”

ally in a completely wooden way to say that God has literally looked away from, been unmindful of, been unaware of, or not heard the psalmists. If one examines these verbs in light of how similar language is used by humans in daily life, one might gain a clearer sense of the psalmists' meaning. It is not unusual for one human to say to another, "I didn't hear you," meaning not literally that the words were not heard, but rather that the words were not fully understood. Similarly, it is not uncommon for a person to use a phrase such as "I didn't see that" or "I was blind to that," meaning that some visual detail did not register or was not fully understood. Or, more generally, the language of "paying attention" or "being truly present" can refer to the degree of one's attention or the quality of one person's presence to another. There is a theological point to be made from this reflection on the genre and metaphorical language of the cries for attention: the language employed strongly implies that the God of the psalms cannot be considered impassible.

### *Cries for Specific Action*

The psalmists' cries for God to act in a meaningful way likewise presume a God who is passible. The psalmists' cry for divine action is most characteristically expressed in the most frequent imperative, the call for God to "rise up!" (קוּמָה; 3:7; 7:6; 9:19). The metaphor of rising from a sitting position to a standing position, occurring as it does in the genre of the prayer for help, should be understood as a call for God to initiate meaningful action in the psalmist's behalf. Various prayers, then, call on God to take different action in particular contexts. These cries use vocabulary that can be understood broadly as calls for help as well as more specific vocabulary. The more general vocabulary includes calls for God to "save/help" (יִשַׁע; 3:7; 6:4; 7:1), to "be gracious" (חַנּוּן; 4:1; 6:2; 9:13), to "deliver" (חָלַץ; 6:4; 119:153), to "rescue" (נִצַּל; 7:1; 22:20), to "redeem" (פָּדָה; 26:11; 44:26), and to "remember" (זָכַר; 74:2; 89:47; 119:49). The more specific vocabulary includes calls for God to "forgive" (נָשָׂא; 25:18; cf. 51:2-7), to "heal" (רָפָא; 6:2), to "guide" (נָהַל; 31:3), to "vindicate" from false witness (שָׁפֵט; 26:1), and to "guard" (שָׁמַר; 17:8). Pleas to save from enemies make up a special class of petitions and take many different forms, such as "put them in fear" (9:20), "break the arm" (10:15), "confront them, overthrow them" (17:13), and the like. Taken as a whole, these petitions—whether a generic call for help in any situation or a particular request for a very specific kind of help—imply a God who can be, and at times is, moved to action by human pleas.

### *The Witness of the Motivating Clauses*

One feature of the form of the prayers for help that has received little theological reflection is the motivating and urging clauses that often accompany

the petitions in the psalms.<sup>22</sup> Often, these motivating and urging clauses are introduced by a causal marker such as *כִּי* or *לָכֵן*. It is traditional to distinguish between three types of complaint clauses in the prayers for help: (1) the “I complaint” about the sufferer’s condition, (2) the “you complaint” about God’s withholding or withdrawal of saving help, and (3) the “they complaint” about the enemy/enemies’ oppression or the lack of attention of friends and family.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, these motivating and urging clauses that are part of the petition may be cautiously divided into three sets: (1) the “I motivating clauses” that urge God to act on account of the sufferer and the sufferer’s relationship with God (i.e., the sufferer’s piety, faithfulness, or pain), (2) the “you motivating clauses” that urge God to answer a prayer on account of something within God (i.e., God’s character or promise), and (3) the “they motivating clauses” that urge God to act because of the oppression of the enemies (i.e., their wickedness or opposition to God’s will).<sup>24</sup> As examples of the three types of motivating and urging clauses, consider the following petitions:

### Examples of “I motivating clauses”

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!  
give light to my eyes, or *I will sleep the sleep of death . . .* (13:3)

Be gracious to me, O Lord, *for I am in distress;*  
*my eye wastes away from grief,*  
*my soul and body also.* (31:9)

### Examples of “you motivating clauses”

Turn, O Lord, save my life;  
deliver me *for the sake of your steadfast love.* (6:4)

<sup>22</sup> The language of “motivating and urging” is taken from Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 114–17. Gunkel called this feature of the prayers for help the “rationale for divine intervention” (*Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James Nogalski [Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998], 170). Gunkel wrote that these clauses “make an impression on YHWH, but at the same time should *comfort the heart of the complaining* at the moment he speaks them and they should ensure the help of God.” Along this line of inquiry, the psalms of trust also contain many causal clauses, which function similarly to the motivating clauses in the prayers for help and which would provide suitable material for theological reflection.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 64.

<sup>24</sup> I suggest that this distinction must remain “cautious” because in many phrases and clauses the three overlap, as in Ps 22:9: “Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast,” or “Deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love. For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?” (6:4b-5).

Listen to the sound of my cry;  
 my King and my God, *for to you I pray* . . .  
*For you are not a God who delights in wickedness.* (5:2, 4a)

### Examples of “they motivating clauses”

Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness  
*because of my enemies.* . . . (5:8a)

Make them bear their guilt, O God;  
 let them fall by their own counsels;  
*because of their many transgressions cast them out,*  
*for they have rebelled against you.* (5:10)

Do not be far from me,  
*for trouble is near and there is no one to help.*  
*Many strong bulls encircle me,*  
*strong bulls of Bashan surround me.* (22:11-12)

These brief examples are offered as a thumbnail sketch of the pattern of the motivating and urging clauses in their three forms—I, you, and they. Because I have taken up the general issue of the character of God in the psalms elsewhere, I will focus here on the theological implications of the “I motivating clauses” and the “they motivating clauses.”<sup>25</sup>

The motivating and urging clauses in which the psalmists *describe their own sufferings* or describe *the threats and violence of enemies* are pertinent to the discussion of God’s passibility. Miller has written, “Certainly the description of the plight of the petitioner, the lament over trouble and affliction, can be understood as evoking or eliciting *the sympathetic response of God.*”<sup>26</sup> The language of a “sympathetic response” obviously underscores yet again the notion of a responsive, passible God. Moreover, the language in the motivating clauses themselves points more particularly to a God *who is moved by the suffering of victims and the evil of oppressors*. When pointing to their own sufferings as reasons for God to act, the psalmists argue with God, “I am in anguish,” “I will sleep the sleep of death,” and so on. When pointing to the threats and violence of the oppressors, they argue with God that “they have rebelled against you,” and that “many strong bulls surround me.” To borrow language from the Roman Catholic social justice tradition, the language in

<sup>25</sup> I have written about the issue of God’s character elsewhere; see *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms*, 117–37, and *Invitation to the Psalms*, 149–76.

<sup>26</sup> Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 114. Emphasis added.

the motivating clauses points to a God who has a *preferential option for the oppressed and a preferential option against oppressors*.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, as Miller has observed, the logical nature and argumentative structure of the psalmists' motivating clauses are significant when understanding how the psalmists construe God. He writes that "one of the primary aims of the prayer for help is *to urge and reason with God*." Miller acknowledges that this rhetorical form is potentially disturbing, since it might suggest that without a rational structure, a prayer goes unheard. But on the positive side of the equation, prayer is not simply "a matter of asking for help and receiving it."

The prayers do not assume that things are cut and dried, that God either answers prayer or does not. They seek to evoke a response, not just through the petitions themselves but through all dimensions of the prayer and especially those sentences and clauses that suggest reasons for God's actions and results that can be accomplished or prevented by God's intervention. The impassibility of God is not a part of Israel's understanding of prayer. In form and content, the prayer for help assumes that God can be moved and that God can be persuaded to act in the situation so that it is changed for good.<sup>28</sup>

To press Miller's insight even further, the logical structure of the motivating and urging clauses points to a God who is moved on the basis of rational grounds—that is, a God whose actions are rational rather than capricious.

The prayers of the Psalter assume that God's attention is not difficult to get and that God's favor is not won. The God of the psalms does not require liturgical-ritual actions to be performed for God's attention to be drawn. Incense need not be burned as a sort of smelling salt to garner God's attention; rather, the prayer itself is to "be counted as incense before" God. God's favor likewise cannot be bought. God is more likely to be moved *by passion* (the suffering of the innocent or the greed and violence of the oppressor) than by lavish sacrifice—neither "sacrifice" nor "burnt offering" nor "sin offering" nor "bull" nor "goats" nor "wild animal of the forest" nor "birds of the air" please God or gain God's gaze.<sup>29</sup> Rather, God is moved by such things as the humility of a broken spirit (50:17), the repentance of contrite hearts (51:17), thankful hearts (50:23), and lives conformed to God's will (40:7-10).

<sup>27</sup> See Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991).

<sup>28</sup> Miller, "Prayer as Persuasion," *Word & World* 13 (1993): 356–62, 361.

<sup>29</sup> See 40:6; 50:8-11; 51:16-17.

*Summary and Directions for Further Inquiry*

In summary, the God of the Psalter is immutable in terms of God's existence, person, and personal character and God's election of Israel and revelation in God's word to Israel. But in terms of God's *particular actions and dealings with creation, with Israel, and with individual Israelites*, God is passible. This basic distinction can be seen most clearly in Ps 103. This psalm repeats Israel's creedlike confession concerning God's character (merciful, gracious, abounding in steadfast love) but also speaks of God changing over time in terms of anger and judgment:

The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
 He will not always accuse,  
 nor will he keep his anger forever. (103:8-9)

Alan Padgett's apt description of God's unchanging-yet-changing nature over time captures the view of God in the psalms:

God changes, indeed, but only in relationship to a changing reality of which he is the creator and Lord. God does not change in his basic nature, in his character, or in his perfections. The necessary existence of God, on the one hand, is immutable and eternal, since it is not affected or effected by anything else. But with respect to his power, for example, God's activity changes in relation to the changing world he sustains, but the fact that God is omnipotent does not change. God is immutable, therefore, but he is not absolutely immutable in the Augustinian-Thomistic sense. . . . God is necessarily or essentially immutable with respect to a limited set of predicates, which are his character and perfections.<sup>30</sup>

The Psalter's God is neither capricious nor a God who can be bought for a price. The God of the psalms is not a God who more readily answers the prayers of the powerful; neither is the God of the psalms a God who can be controlled by ritual manipulation (or even whose attention can be gained by ritual action). Rather, the God of the psalms is moved at times on the basis of both reason and emotion. God is moved at times emotionally by the suffering of the innocent and is also moved at times by the arrogance of the wicked. Similarly, the God of the psalms can be moved rationally by the persuasive logic of prayer. This is not to imply that reason and emotion are unrelated. I suggest neither that reason is coldly rational and objective nor that emotion is erratic and subjective. Rather, the two are interrelated.

<sup>30</sup> Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 124–25.

There is more investigation to be done along this line of inquiry. One question that needs to be pursued is whether more can be said about the relationship between God's unchanging character and nature, on the one hand, and God's "passibility" and "movability," on the other hand. Many years ago Robert Jenson, in his excellent book *Story and Promise*, described the basic characteristic of the good news as "story." The church's call is to tell this good-news story. But, Jenson wrote, as the world changes, the story both changes and does not change. "It is in fidelity to its own character that the gospel changes. The story about Jesus is gospel because it is the key to our stories, the liberating interpretation of the fears and commitments of its hearers . . . the gospel, while always news about the same person Jesus, is itself, as a human communication between men, not unchanging."<sup>31</sup> "Precisely to be itself, the gospel is never told the same way twice."<sup>32</sup> Yet, in "all its changes, the gospel remains the same."<sup>33</sup> Something like this must be said about the God of the psalms. As creation changes, God changes how God responds, acts, interrelates, and is faithful to and redeems Israel and creation. But God changes—and is moved to change—precisely in order to be unchangingly true to who God is as a lord "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

A second line of inquiry that will need to be pursued is whether anything can be said about the occasions when God moves to intercede in behalf of creation, Israel, or individual followers of Israel's God. It is clear—especially in the psalms of thanksgiving—that Israel bore witness to the reality of the Lord's saving deeds (נִפְלְאוֹת) and "remembrances" (מְזֻכְרוֹת) regarding Israel. On the other hand, it is equally clear—especially in the prayers for help—that both individual Israelites and the people as a whole could not understand or fathom the same God's seeming absence and inattention: "Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?" (89:49). This line of inquiry will therefore need to address questions of theodicy. It will need to ask, to put it bluntly, if the psalms give any direction or answers to the question of why God might be moved to act by some prayers, but not by others.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Jenson, *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel about Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 10.

<sup>32</sup> Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Jenson, *Story and Promise*.

## The Royal Psalms and Divine Election

The God of the psalms is a relational and committing God, a God who chooses to enter into relationship with the beloved creation, who commits the divine name and self to Israel, and who commits also to specific people and offices within Israel. The God of the psalms is an electing God.

The traditional theological locus that speaks to God's commitment to Israel is election—a theological concept that has received inadequate reflection with regard to the psalms. Addressing the question of why the concept of election has received inadequate attention overall by biblical theologians, Joel Kaminsky wrote: "The most obvious [reason] is that the idea that God favors certain individuals or groups over others is theologically and morally troublesome to modern Western thinkers."<sup>34</sup> The idea that God would choose one person to the exclusion of another, or one people to the exclusion of others, makes some uncomfortable. While Kaminsky acknowledges that the psalms "regularly explore various aspects of Israel's election theology," he devotes only four paragraphs to the Psalter's contribution to theological reflection on election.<sup>35</sup> More to the point, Kaminsky pursues a line of inquiry that seeks to understand and reclaim the concept of election. Here, I am interested in the related line of inquiry to try to understand what the election material in the psalms says about the Psalter's God.

### *The Semantic Field of Election*

The Psalter bears witness to a God who chose (or elected) Israel. In the Psalter, as well as other places in the Old Testament, the verb בָּחַר expresses the concept of election. The basic meaning of the verb is "choose" (e.g., "He chose [בָּחַר] the tribe of Judah"). In the Psalter the verb is used to demarcate God's election of the people as a whole (33:12; 47:4; 65:4; 78:67-70; 132:13; 135:4), God's election of individual Israelites for roles within the people (David, 89:19; Aaron, 105:26), the response of the elect to choose to follow God (25:12; 119:30, 173), and also God's "non-election" of the northern tribes (77:67).<sup>36</sup> The semantic field of "election," somewhat sur-

<sup>34</sup> Joel Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 1. See also H. H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth, 1950); Will Herberg, "The 'Chosenness' of Israel and the Jew of Today," in *Arguments and Doctrines: A Reader of Jewish Thinking in the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, ed. Arthur Cohen (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 270–83; David Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>35</sup> Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 159–61.

<sup>36</sup> Here, see Kaminsky's discussion of the "non-elect"; *Yet I Loved Jacob*, ch. 8.

prisingly, includes the concept of God's "love" and "desire."<sup>37</sup> Most importantly, the semantic field of election encompasses the concepts of covenant (כְּרִית בְּרִית) and of God binding God's self to Israel by means of God's solemn oath (נִשְׁבַּע): "I have made a covenant (כְּרִיתִי בְרִית) with my chosen one (בְּחִיר), I have sworn (נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי) to my servant David" (89:3; see also v. 35).<sup>38</sup>

The language of "chosen," "covenant," "love," "desire," and "swearing an oath" creates a semantic field that encompasses not only election but also covenant, promise, and relationship. Although Kaminsky has noted this, his line of inquiry guides him to reflect on the nature of God's covenants and promises (are they conditional, or unconditional, or consistent?) as well as on the reception history of these concepts—*rather than on the nature of the God who elects*.<sup>39</sup>

### *The Nature of the Electing God*

When inquiring into what the psalms have to say about *the nature of the God who elects*, the picture that emerges is of a God *who freely initiates relationships* and then commits to *surrender the divine freedom for the sake of those with whom the relationship exists*. There is a distinction here between divine freedom and divine commitment. Most central here is the matter of the Lord's election of Israel—and especially of Judah and the so-called double election of the Davidic monarchy and Jerusalem (Zion).<sup>40</sup> The concept of election presumes—at least initially—the free and sovereign act of God. As noted above, Israel understood its election by God as an act of divine love: "He chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves" (78:68b; cf. 47:4). God's act of entering into relationship with Israel was God's commitment to love Israel once and forever.

The psalms offer no reason for this loving act of election. Israel neither merited God's election to begin with nor earned God's continuing love. Quite the opposite. The originating act of electing Abraham and Sarah occurred when Israel was "few in number, of little account, and strangers in [the land of Canaan], wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people" (105:12-13). The renewing act of election in Egypt occurred when

<sup>37</sup> E.g., "He chose the tribe of Jacob, Mount Zion, which he loved" (אִהָב; 78:68); "He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves" (אִהָב; 47:4); and "For the Lord has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling" (132:13).

<sup>38</sup> See also 132:11 and 105:9.

<sup>39</sup> See his discussion of covenant and promise in *Yet I Loved Jacob*, ch. 5.

<sup>40</sup> See J. J. M. Roberts, "The Davidic Origin of the Zion Tradition," *JBL* 92 (1973): 329-44; "Zion in the Theology of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire," in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon*, ed. Tomoo Ishida (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1982), 93-108; and "Yahweh's Foundation in Zion," *JBL* 106 (1987): 27-45. See esp. Pss 46 and 48.

“Jacob lived as an alien in the land of Ham” (105:23b) and when they “did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea” (106:7bc). The psalms also emphasize that the maintenance of the relationship between God and Israel was a matter of divine love and forgiveness. One might even say it was an act of ongoing election—that God chose to reelect Israel anew with every generation. This was necessary because “they soon forgot his works” (106:13a). Two of the historical psalms, Ps 78 and Ps 106, describe at great lengths the ways in which Israel did not merit God’s ongoing love (78:17-72; 106:7-46).<sup>41</sup> Psalm 105 describes the positive side of the equation, describing Israel’s history as the history of God’s wonders on Israel’s behalf as an act of God who “remembered his holy promise, to Abraham his servant” (105:42).

God’s ongoing work of maintaining the relationship with Israel—of reelecting Israel anew in each generation—points again to the nature of the God of the psalms as a relational, committing nature. God’s commitment to Israel is not based on who Israel is or what Israel has done; rather, God’s commitment to Israel is based solely on the divine character—that God committed God’s self to being faithful to Israel for the sake of being in relationship with Israel. In choosing Israel, God surrendered divine freedom in exchange for relational commitment.

### *The Purpose of Election and the Royal Psalms*

When it comes to God’s purposes in election, the psalms are mostly silent. Why did God choose Israel? What was God up to when God chose Abraham and Sarah? Unlike the election theology in other parts of the Old Testament, the psalms are mostly silent. Genesis 12, for example, says that God elected Israel for the sake of a world in which the human family had been broken into many nations and tribes: “I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:2b-3). In Genesis, Israel is elected for a purpose that includes the healing of the human family. Israel is blessed not merely for its own sake, but so that other nations would be blessed through Israel. In Exodus there is again the sense that Israel, as God’s elect, both has a special relationship with God (“you will be my treasured possession out of all the peoples”; 19:5) and has a unique purpose (“you shall be a priestly nation”; 19:6). Israel is rescued from Egypt and reelected at Sinai to be God’s “priestly nation” through whom God shall love and bless the earth.

<sup>41</sup> Note that Ps 78 also describes what Kaminsky calls the “non-election” of Ephraim.

In Second Isaiah, the prophet of the exile announces again that God's rescue and reelection of Judah is for a teleological purpose. The prophet says,

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors to Israel;  
I will give you as a light to nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."  
Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,  
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers,  
Kings shall see and stand up,  
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;  
Because of the Lord, who is faithful,  
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you. (49:6-7)

The meaning of this passage is debated. But I would argue that this is a "reelection text" (וּיְבָרְכֶנּוּ) and that Israel, who is "abhorred by the nations," shall now be "a light to the nations." Similarly, the exilic prophet announces that the reelected Judah, who "will bring forth justice to the nations," has been given by God "as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind" (42:1d, 6c-7a). In the psalms there is little more than a hint that there might have been a further divine purpose in electing and reelecting Israel other than to have a people to love and with whom to be in relationship. God "brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing . . . that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws" (105:43, 45).

But that does not mean that the Psalter does not offer material that will help us inquire into what the God of the Psalter's purposes might be in election. The royal psalms, in particular, are a fruitful place to begin such an inquiry. As mentioned above, in the Psalter the terminology of election applies not only to God's election of the people Israel but also to individual people and offices within Israel. The psalms speak of the election of David and his line to be kings (2:7-9; 89:3, 19; 110:1; 132:11) as well as the election of Moses and Aaron as prophets (105:26) and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as familial heads (105:9-10).

The election of David and his line is especially significant here, because the royal psalms provide a thick description of divine purposes in this election. The royal psalms include Pss 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144.<sup>42</sup> Psalms 72 and 101 are especially germane to this study, because they paint a portrait of a servant king—one whose election is for service to the

<sup>42</sup> *Contra* Gerstenberger, who understands the singer of Ps 101 as the head of a postexilic tribal community, I follow the majority of commentators who understand Ps 101 as a royal psalm. See *Psalms, Part 2 and Lamentations*, FOTL 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

welfare of the people as a whole, rather than for the purpose of self-interest. As is well known, Ps 89 describes the election of David and the so-called unconditional nature of the election. David and his line are chosen. If they violate the covenant, they will be punished, but the election itself is unconditional:

Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one,  
 and said: "I have set the crown on one who is mighty,  
 I have exalted one chosen from the people.  
 I have found my servant David;  
 with my holy oil I have anointed him. . . .  
 Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him,  
 and my covenant with him will stand firm.  
 I will establish his line forever,  
 and his throne as long as the heavens endure.  
 If his children forsake my law  
 and do not walk according to my ordinances,  
 if they violate my statutes  
 and do not keep my commandments,  
 then I will punish their transgression with the rod  
 and their iniquity with scourges;  
 but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,  
 or be false to my faithfulness." (89:19-20, 28-33)

In passing, it is worth noting again how the God of the psalms has employed the divine freedom in initiating the relationship by electing David but then surrendered divine freedom by making the relationship and election unconditional: "I will not violate my covenant." More directly to the point of the elected king's vocational responsibility to serve the welfare of the nation, there is only the requirement that the king shall "walk according to my ordinances," not "violate my statutes," and "keep my commandments." What it means for the king to "keep my commandments" is more fully expressed in Pss 72 and 101.

Psalm 72, which is a prayer for the king, reflects the role of the king as judge and prays that the king will establish justice:

Give the king your justice, O God,  
 and your righteousness to a king's son.  
 May he judge your people with righteousness,  
 and your poor with justice.  
 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
 and the hills, in righteousness.  
 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
 give deliverance to the needy,  
 and crush the oppressor. . . .

For he delivers the needy when they call,  
 the poor and those who have no helper.  
 He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
 and saves the lives of the needy.  
 From oppression and violence he redeems their life;  
 and precious is their blood in his sight. (vv. 1-4, 12-14)

The text needs little elaboration. The king's vocation is to serve the welfare of the people by establishing justice in the court and by providing for the unprotected members of the nation—the poor, the needy, the weak, those who have no helper. The term “helper” (עֲזָרָה), here as elsewhere, has no direct, common analogue in English. It refers to a member of an extended family system who fulfills the family's legal obligation to a relative in need. The term is significant here because the psalm implies that the king shall act on behalf of the entire people as the עֲזָרָה for those members of the nation who have no עֲזָרָה.

In short, God's purpose in electing the Davidic scion as king includes creating a just and safe environment, in which all of the people of Israel—including the most vulnerable—may thrive and be safe. This safe environment is an environment in which the God of the Psalter's characteristic qualities of justice, mercy, love, and faithfulness are firstly embodied in the king, and secondarily embodied in the people. To put the matter differently, in pseudo-sacramental fashion, the divine attributes of justice and mercy and love are to be communicated (imperfectly, of course) to the king for the purposes of his divinely bestowed vocation.

I am arguing here that—by way of analogy—we can gain some insight into the God of the Hebrew Psalter's *telos* in electing Israel. In the psalms, both the people as a whole and the Davidic king are elected by God. There is little material in the Psalter itself that shines direct light on whether God had further purposes in electing Israel, other than to have a people to love and to be in relationship with (which is not to say that this is insignificant). But by way of analogy, we can move from reflecting on God's *election of and purposes for the king* and can chart out an interpretive trajectory in which God's *election of and purposes for the people* are similarly understood as creating a safe and trustworthy space in the midst of a broken and dangerous creation that is in rebellion against its creator (see Ps 46). God's purpose in electing Israel includes creating a just and safe environment: firstly within Israel, and then secondarily—through Israel—to the world. This safe environment is an environment in which the God of the Psalter's characteristic qualities of justice, mercy, love, and faithfulness are firstly embodied in the king, and secondarily embodied in the people. To put the matter differently, in pseudo-sacramental fashion, the Psalter bears witness to a God who elected Israel for at least two

complementary purposes. First, God elected Israel to have a people to love, to be in relationship with. Second, God elected Israel so that the divine attributes of justice and mercy and love would be communicated (imperfectly, of course) to Israel—and through Israel to the world—for the purpose of creating a trustworthy, just, and merciful world.

There is more work to be done. Does the (synchronic) canonical shape of the Psalter—especially the presence of the royal psalms at the so-called seams of the Psalter—contribute to the understanding of the God of the Psalter? Does the (diachronic) history of the editorial shaping of the Psalter contribute to this line of inquiry? Does the historical reality that, following the exile, the Davidic monarchy was not reestablished limit or contribute in some fashion to the ways in which the royal psalms are interpreted theologically? If it is true, as some interpreters have suggested, that the royal psalms were “democratized” in the process of the editorial shaping of the Psalter so that Israel as a whole or individual Judeans would understand themselves to embody the theological and ethical identity of the king, how might this possibility contribute to an understanding of divine election in the Psalter?<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to explore one possible approach to articulating a theology of the psalms—a theology that attempts to describe the person of the God to whom the Psalter implicitly and explicitly bears witness. This line of inquiry has pursued, respectively, two genres of psalms and two theological issues: the prayers of help and the issue of God’s impassibility and passibility, on the one hand, and the royal psalms and the issue of divine election, on the other hand. It was argued that prayers of help imply that the God of the Psalter is to be understood as impassible in relation to God’s being and character as well as both the election of Israel and God’s word to Israel, but passible in terms of God’s actions. In specific, it was argued that the God of the psalms can be moved to act both emotionally, by the oppression of the weak and arrogance of the oppressors, and rationally, via logical argument. It was also argued that the God of the psalms is a relational, electing God—a God who freely elected Israel to love and who surrendered some divine freedom both for the sake of the relationship with Israel and for the sake of the divine purpose for Israel.

<sup>43</sup> See Starbuck, *Court Oracles in the Psalms*. See also Susan Gillingham, *A Journey of Two Psalms: The Reception of Psalms 1 and 2 in Jewish and Christian History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chs. 1–2.