

The
PSALTER
RECLAIMED

Praying and Praising with the Psalms

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Acknowledgments

This collection contains various lectures on the Psalms that I gave between 1997 and 2010. Their publication started with a request to publish the four (chaps. 2–5) that I gave at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2006, two of which have already been published elsewhere. They are republished here with permission, as indicated at their respective chapters. I have added some others to this core to round out the collection. This means that while the lectures and essays have been slightly adapted to this book form, there is inevitably some overlap between them.

Concurrently with giving these lectures I was working on a book on the ethics of the Psalms, recently published as *Psalms as Torah* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), which particularly develops ideas first explored in the essay “The Ethics of the Psalms.”

What Are We Doing Singing the Psalms?¹

“Let me write the songs of a nation, and I care not who writes its laws.” So said the distinguished Scottish politician Andrew Fletcher in a book published in 1704. Fletcher was a forerunner of the Scottish National Party in fighting for Scottish independence. His comment is the more intriguing in that as a member of the Scottish parliament he was very active in promoting legislation. Yet he recognized the power of song to capture and mold people’s imaginations and attitudes to life.

This insight, though, seems to have eluded most biblical scholars. The significance of the Psalms for biblical ethics has been surprisingly overlooked. Their unique character as powerful shapers of individual virtues and social attitudes is largely ignored in books on Old Testament ethics. It is my belief that reciting the psalms, and specially singing them, has profoundly influenced both Jewish and Christian theology and ethics.

Most, if not all, of the psalms were originally composed to be sung in temple worship, and through the centuries they have continued to be sung in church and synagogue. So in this chapter I first want to give a brief overview of the history of their liturgical use and discuss the peculiar impact of setting their words to music. But the Psalter’s present arrangement suggests that when the psalms were collected together as a book, it may well be that a secondary use for them developed, namely, as a resource for private meditation and devotion. I want to suggest that the Psalter is

¹Originally delivered at Highland Theological College, Dingwall, Scotland, October 24, 2008; first published as in *Irish Biblical Studies* 28 (2010): 147–69. Used by permission.

a deliberately organized anthology designed for memorization. In the days before the printing press Scripture was regularly memorized, and certain features of the Psalter suggest that it was used this way. I shall reflect on the implications that memorization has for their authority.

Finally I want to use speech-act theory to explore what we are doing when we recite publicly or sing the psalms. I will suggest that in some ways singing a psalm or hymn is like taking an oath: we are committing ourselves in a binding way to a particular set of beliefs and embracing a lifestyle. Perhaps this is not evident on the surface, but I hope to show that there is much more to singing the psalms than exercising our lungs!

Singing the Psalms down the Ages

The books of Chronicles contain many references to psalm singing, both in the temple and outside it. They tell how David appointed the Levites to lead worship. Some of the Levites carried the ark to Jerusalem while others sang and played musical instruments (1 Chron. 15:15–16). When the Israelites arrived in Jerusalem, Chronicles records that David appointed the Levites to sing thanksgivings. First Chronicles 16:8–36 gives the texts sung on this occasion. These correspond to Psalm 105:1–15 (1 Chron. 16:8–22); Psalm 96:1–13 (1 Chron. 16:23–34); and Psalm 106:47–48 (1 Chron. 16:35–36). Presumably these are to be understood as just a selection of the psalms used on this great occasion. It is not clear what others could have been used.²

The use of psalms in temple worship is confirmed by a study of the psalms themselves. Conventional form criticism has ignored the titles of psalms and developed its theories on the basis of the content of the psalms alone. The numerous references to entering the temple and offering sacrifice, and the obvious relevance of many psalms to the great national festivals, such as Passover and Tabernacles, led

²It is noteworthy that none of these psalms has a title in the Psalter, let alone is called a psalm of David. It may be that Chronicles understands the title “Of David” in Psalm 103 to apply to the following untitled psalms (104–6).

scholars such as Gunkel and Mowinckel to argue that many of the psalms were composed for use in the pre-exilic temple.

The titles of the psalms point in the same direction. One says it is “for the thank offering” (Psalm 100, RSV), another “for the Sabbath” (92). Many others have the heading “To the choirmaster,” if that is the right translation, while sometimes the tune seems to be specified “according to Lilies” (45, 69, 80) or “according to the Dove on Far-off Terebinths” (56). The book of Nehemiah tells of two choirs processing around the just-rebuilt walls of Jerusalem singing psalms (Neh. 12:31–43).

Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, manuscripts of the Psalms are more frequent than any other type, attesting their widespread use among Jews in New Testament times. The Gospels describe Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the crowds’ greeting him with Psalm 118, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Mark 11:9; cf. Ps. 118:25–26). Jesus himself and his disciples sang this psalm and the immediately preceding ones at the Last Supper.³ The early church continued the practice of singing the psalms. Paul assumed that the Corinthians, Colossians, and Ephesians sang the psalms: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16; cf. 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19).

By the beginning of “the fourth century the memorization of the Psalms by many Christians and their habitual use as songs in worship by all Christians about whom we know were matters of long-standing tradition.”⁴ The use of the Psalms in private prayer and public worship is most eloquently advocated by Athanasius in his letter to Marcellinus. He wrote:

Whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill.⁵

³The hymn they sang is the Great Hallel, Psalms 113–18, used at Passover and other festivals.

⁴William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 165.

⁵Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, with appendix “On the Interpretation of the Psalms,” ed. and trans. a religious of C.S.M.V. (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1977), 103.

If you want to declare anyone to be blessed; you find the way to do it in Psalm 1, and likewise in 32, 41, 112, 119, and 128. If you want to rebuke the conspiracy of the Jews against the Saviour, you have Psalm 2. If you are persecuted by your own family and opposed by many, say Psalm 3; and when you would give thanks to God at your affliction's end, sing 4 and 75 and 116. When you see the wicked wanting to ensnare you and you wish your prayer to reach God's ears, then wake up early and sing 5.⁶

Athanasius sees Psalm 32 as particularly appropriate at baptisms: "Whenever a number of you want to sing together, being all good and upright men, then use the 33rd ["Shout for joy in the LORD, O you righteous! / Praise befits the upright]."⁷

When St. Benedict established monasteries in the sixth century, he prescribed that psalms should be used at the eight services of the day. Some psalms (e.g., 51, 134) were used every day, and in the course of the whole week all the psalms would be sung. But it was not just in the monasteries that the psalms were used. In the Middle Ages the Psalter was the only part of the Bible a layman was likely to own. It is said that King Alfred the Great "was frequent in psalm-singing and prayer at the hours both of the day and night."⁸ Martin Luther, as a good monk, was brought up on the Psalms, and Luther scholars think that it was his study of the Psalms that led him to his understanding of justification by faith.

Certainly Luther encouraged the singing of the psalms in public worship. He said, "The whole Psalter, Psalm by Psalm, should remain in use, and the entire Scripture, lesson by lesson, should continue to be read to the people."⁹ His first hymnbook contained twenty-three hymns, of which six were versions of psalms. The Reformed tradition was even more diligent in producing singable metrical versions of the psalms. Bucer, Calvin, Hopkins, and

⁶Ibid., 107–8.

⁷Ibid., 109.

⁸John A. Giles, *Six Old English Chronicles* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1872), 68, quoted in Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 177.

⁹Timothy E. Lull, ed., *Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 468, quoted in Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 195.

Tate and Brady produced collections of metrical psalms. These continue in use in many Presbyterian churches even today. In other churches the situation is mixed. Since Vatican II, Roman Catholics have been singing more of the psalms, but I fear that in many Protestant churches the psalms have been displaced by hymns and songs. Indeed in a seminary at which I was examiner I was shocked to find there was no study of the Psalms in their BD (MDiv) program!

But what makes singing so significant. Singing, as opposed to mere recitation, helps concentration. Athanasius expressed it well: “For to sing the Psalms demands such concentration of a man’s whole being on them that, in doing it, his usual disharmony of mind and corresponding bodily confusion is resolved, just as the notes of several flutes are brought by harmony to one effect.”¹⁰

Luther made much the same point: adding music to the words involves the whole personality in the act of worship.

Music is to be praised as second only to the Word of God because by her are all the emotions swayed. Nothing on earth is more mighty to make the sad gay and the gay sad, to hearten the downcast, mellow the overweening, temper the exuberant, or mollify the vengeful. . . . That is why there are so many songs and psalms. This precious gift has been bestowed on men alone to remind them that they are created to praise and magnify the Lord.¹¹

David Ford, Regius Professor of Theology at Cambridge, more recently commented:

What does [singing] do with the crucial Christian medium of words? It does with them what praise aims to do with the whole of reality: it takes them up into a transformed, heightened expression, yet without at all taking away their ordinary meaning. Language itself is transcended and its delights and power

¹⁰ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 114.

¹¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor, 1955), 268–69.

are intensified, and at the same time those who join in are bound together more strongly. So singing is a model of the way praise can take up ordinary life and transpose it to a higher level without losing what is good in other levels.¹²

So perhaps Andrew Fletcher was right to suggest that composing a nation's songs is even more significant than drafting its laws.

Singing the psalms also helps us memorize them. I am afraid Anglican chants rarely do this for me, but some of Handel's settings in the Messiah and his Chandos anthems stick in my memory, as of course do hymns based on psalms such as "As Pants the Hart for Cooling Streams," (Psalm 42), "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun" (Psalm 72), and "Praise My Soul the King of Heaven" (Psalm 103). But whether or not the psalms were set to music, people in olden days were very good at memorization. As I was writing this, I came across a comment in *The Times*¹³ that the Romans "were commonly able to recite the *Aeneid*, a 10,000-line poem, word for word; generals would know the name of every soldier in their armies; orators would deliver three-hour speeches without notes."

The same was true among the Greeks. At their dinner parties Greek men were expected to show off their learning by reciting the poems of Homer. They were also performed at great festivals, such as the Panhellenic games at Olympia and Nemea. The Homeric corpus is about as long as the whole Old Testament, so reciting portions of it represents quite a feat of memory by these Greek scribes. In his book *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, David M. Carr has argued that similar practices were common among the neighbors of ancient Israel: the Babylonians, Egyptians, and the Canaanites of Ugarit. It is therefore highly probable that the Israelites did the same. Scribes, maybe drawn from the Levites, would have memorized books of the Bible and proclaimed them at the great festivals. It is possible that they also went round the villages giving recitations of them.

¹² David F. Ford and Daniel W. Hardy, *Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), 19.

¹³ *The Times* October 9, 2008, sec. 2, p. 5.

However, what would the ordinary Israelite have had in the way of Scripture? Certainly not a copy of the Old Testament. Books were prohibitively expensive before the days of printing. Of course the Israelites might have remembered bits of what the scribes recited, especially if they attended the national festivals regularly. But is there a part of the Bible that ordinary people might have memorized themselves? If any book might qualify, it is the Psalter.

Various features make the Psalter, in Luther's words, a mini-Bible. It gives an overview of history from creation through to the conquest of Canaan (e.g., Psalms 104–6). Many psalm titles relate to episodes in David's life. Some clearly celebrate worship in the Jerusalem temple. Other psalms relate the sacking of Jerusalem and reflect on the experience of exile. Thus those who sing the psalms will be constantly reminded of the character of God, his dealings with Israel, and the sin of man. More than that, they will be taught many principles of ethics. Not only are many laws alluded to and underlined, but the Psalter itself is presented as a new Pentateuch arranged in five books like Genesis to Deuteronomy, which the worshipper is encouraged to mutter¹⁴ to himself day and night (Ps. 1:2). That he can do this as well by night as by day indicates that he has learned them by heart: he is most unlikely to be reading a scroll by candlelight. Above all, the Psalter provides the reciter or singer of them with prayers that suit every mood. As Calvin put it:

I am in the habit of calling this book . . . "The Anatomy of all the parts of the soul," for not an affection will any one find in himself, an image of which is not reflected in this mirror. Nay, all the griefs, sorrows, fears, misgivings, hopes, cares, anxieties; in short, all the disquieting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated, the Holy Spirit hath here pictured.¹⁵

Not only does the content make the Psalter useful as a sum-

¹⁴Hebrew *hagah* is often translated "meditate," which Westerners would understand as silent thought. But other passages use this term of pigeons cooing or lions growling (Isa. 31:4; 38:14), so speaking aloud is envisaged when humans "meditate."

¹⁵John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Psalms of David* (Oxford: Tegg, 1840), 1:vi.

mary of the Old Testament and its teaching, but there are many features that may be viewed as aids to memory. Most obvious are the acrostic psalms: working through the alphabet verse by verse would certainly assist memorization. Then there are the verbal linkages between one psalm and the next, grouping of similar themed psalms, and the use of parallelism, alliteration, assonance, chiasms, and rhyme. All these could help the psalms be memorized. Delitzsch and Alexander are two nineteenth commentators who draw attention to some of these features. In recent times the commentaries of Hossfeld and Zenger in German and Vesco in French have provided a more exhaustive account of these features. Given the memorization techniques of the ancients, it is possible that they would not have needed these clues to help them. Nevertheless these clues do make modern readers of the Psalms ask questions about the potential for memorization.

But does history provide parallels to a book being produced for lay as opposed to specialist reciters, and is not the Psalter too long a work for ordinary people to learn by heart? In Greece there were abridged versions of the classics that could be memorized, even though such productions were looked down on by the purists. In India anthologies of Buddhist scriptures (c. AD 100 and 700) were produced with the aim of mass learning. But the most interesting parallels come from the church in North Africa in the third and fifth centuries.

In the course of their catechetical instruction new converts were expected to learn a collection of Bible verses. Cyprian's *Three Books of Testimonies for Quirinus* "is about 33,000 words long . . . and contains rather more than 700 excerpts" and "would take about three and a half hours to read aloud."¹⁶ Augustine's *Mirror of Sacred Scripture*

is roughly 60,000 words long. . . . It would take something over six hours to read aloud at a speed of 160 words per minute. It

¹⁶ Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 165.

contains a little over 800 excerpts, of very varied lengths. The longest is seven pages . . . , containing almost all of Matthew 5–7; there are a number of very short excerpts . . . ; and there is everything in between. The mean length of an excerpt is about seventy words, but there are few of just that length. Augustine, much more than Cyprian, is happy to give lengthy excerpts interspersed with very brief ones. There is no standard length for an excerpt.¹⁷

As modern Westerners we are astonished that new converts could be asked to learn so much, but it must have seemed an easy task compared with learning all the works of Homer or even the *Aeneid*. We can see how Cyprian and Augustine worked in excerpting the Bible. Cyprian arranged his texts topically, whereas Augustine just kept the extracts in the biblical order. Paul Griffiths observes similar features in the Buddhist anthologies. One contains six thousand verses and “almost all of it consists of excerpts from other works.” The editor contributed at most 5 percent of the text, mostly “very brief phrases introducing an excerpt and giving the title of the work from which it was taken.”¹⁸ There are about 312 excerpts, varying in length from a short sentence to 172 verses.

The Psalter fits this pattern of anthology. The psalms are discrete units, and the variety of titles has long suggested to commentators that they are drawn from a variety of earlier collections, for example, a Davidic Psalter, an Asaphite collection, and so on. The length of the Psalter is comparable to the Buddhist and Christian anthologies that Griffiths cites. The Psalter contains 2,527 verses, which, read at nine verses to the minute,¹⁹ would take about four and a half hours to recite. The variation in length of individual psalms is comparable to other anthologies.

I think this view of the Psalter has much to be said in its favor, but I would not pretend to have offered hard proof. Whether or not

¹⁷ Ibid., 169.

¹⁸ Ibid., 133.

¹⁹ This is the speed at which Griffiths reckons the Buddhist texts would have been recited. This is quite slow for reading the psalms. Kol Israel (“Voice of Israel” radio) read them unhurriedly at ten verses per minute.

it is an anthology of earlier texts, I believe it extremely probable that it was intended to be memorized. And we need to explore the significance of memorization. Once again Griffiths has some very astute observations. Memorization goes hand in hand with religious reading. This is quite different from modern reading styles. Most modern readers approach texts in what Griffiths terms a consumerist fashion. You read what you like, read when you like, and accept what you like in what you read. Then you discard what you have just read and move on to read something else. In Griffiths's opinion this characterizes our approach to reading everything, from newspaper articles to academic monographs.

The approach of religious readers is quite different. They see the work read as an infinite resource. "It is a treasure-house, an ocean, a mine; the deeper religious readers dig . . . the greater will be their reward."²⁰ The work read is treated with great reverence. Griffiths explains: "For the religious reader, the work read is an object of overpowering delight and great beauty. It can never be discarded because it can never be exhausted. It can only be reread, with reverence and ecstasy."²¹ Psalm 119:97 gives expression to this outlook.

Oh how I love your law!
It is my meditation all the day.

Griffiths continues, "For [religious] readers the ideally read work is the memorized work, and the ideal mode of rereading is by memorial recall." As a reader memorizes a text, he becomes textualized; that is, he embodies the work he has committed to memory. "Ezekiel's eating of the prophetic scroll . . . is a representation of the kind of incorporation and internalization involved in religious reading: the work is ingested, used for nourishment, incorporated: it becomes the basis for rumination and for action."²²

Further, "A memorized work (like a lover, a friend, a spouse,

²⁰ Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²² *Ibid.*, 46.

a child) has entered into the fabric of its possessor's intellectual and emotional life in a way that makes deep claims upon that life, claims that can only be ignored with effort and deliberation."²³ Medieval theologians used lively images to describe the relationship between the memorized work and the reciter. Bernard of Clairvaux described the Bible as the wine cellar of the Holy Spirit.²⁴ Anselm of Canterbury compared Scripture to honeycomb: "Taste the goodness of your Redeemer, burn with love for your Saviour. Chew the honeycomb of his words, suck their flavour, which is more pleasing than honey, swallow their health-giving sweetness."²⁵

One hopes that this is the experience of many as they sing and pray the psalms. They mold one's character and heighten one's love of God.

The Psalms as Speech Acts

But there is even more to the impact that the Psalms make on their users, as speech-act theorists have pointed out. The didactic function of prayers, hymns, and songs is evident. When we say the Lord's Prayer we are committing ourselves to certain beliefs and attitudes. Its opening invocation, "Our Father, who art in heaven," clearly teaches some very basic theology about the relationship between God and his people. If they should call him Father, then they are his sons. It is a relationship that involves intimacy (he is our Father) and also distance (he is in heaven). But there is also an ethical dimension to calling God our Father in heaven. In a traditional patriarchal culture the father was an authority figure whose word was law in the family: he had to be obeyed. By saying "Our Father" the early church at least was acknowledging divine authority and implicitly submitting to it.

The same is true of hymns. The hymns and songs of apparently liturgy-free churches have much the same role as the prescribed prayers of liturgical worship. Both implicitly and explicitly they

²³ Ibid., 47.

²⁴ Ibid., 42, quoting Bernard's thirty-fifth sermon on the Song of Songs.

²⁵ Griffiths, 43 quoting Anselm, *Opera Omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1946), 3:84.

teach theology and ethics. Christmas carols, such as “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” or “O Come All Ye Faithful,” proclaim and explain aspects of the incarnation. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” and “There Is a Green Hill” teach about the meaning of the crucifixion.” Graham Kendrick’s “Servant King” has the refrain,

This is our God, the Servant King:
he calls us now to follow him.

George Herbert wrote,

Teach me, my God and king,
in all things thee to see
and what I do in anything
to do it as for thee.

Thus singing hymns inculcates a variety of Christian truths and ethical principles: indeed the worshipper is compelled to subscribe to them in the very act of singing. If one objects and refuses to sing a particular line or verse, it may well be noticed! Thus there is a strong social pressure to conform as well.

The teaching power of hymns is acknowledged in a recent hymnal, titled *Hymns Old and New*. The compilers have rewritten many old hymns to eliminate their alleged sexism or militarism. For instance, “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war” becomes “Onward Christian pilgrims, Christ will be our light”! They comment:

We were also concerned that the book should use positive and appropriate images, and decided that militarism and triumphalism were, therefore, not appropriate. We recognise that military imagery is used in the Bible, but history, including current events, shows only too clearly the misuse to which those images are open. All too often in the Christian and other religions, texts advocating spiritual warfare are used to justify the self-serving ambitions behind temporal conflicts. Christian “triumph” is the

triumph of love which “is not envious or boastful or arrogant”
(1 Corinthians 13:4): the triumph of the cross.²⁶

I doubt that many readers will agree with these sentiments, but this attention to what hymns affirm does alert us to what is happening when we pray, and when we sing hymns or psalms. The psalms teach us the fundamentals of the faith and instruct us too in ethics.

But the psalms do even more. Singing them commits us in attitudes, speech, and actions. In the mid-twentieth century, two philosophers, J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle, shed light on the nature of speech. They pointed out that speech is much more than the exchange of information: it changes situations. A promise, for example, lays an obligation on the one who makes the promise and creates an expectation in the one who hears it. This has implications for our use of the Psalms, as we shall see.

The Psalms differ from other parts of the Bible in that they are meant to be recited or sung as prayers. That makes them public address to God. By using them as prayers or singing them, worshippers declare their faith and their commitment to God’s ways. But narrative and law are different. The Old Testament narratives were presumably recited by storytellers, but they rarely make explicit their judgments on the actions that are recited, so the moral of the story might have been missed and certainly did not have to be endorsed by the listeners. They could just ignore the point, as I suspect many listening to worthy sermons often do.

The same is true of the laws. Few people would have had written copies of the law. In the light of the practice in neighboring cultures, it would seem likely that most people’s knowledge would have come from hearing recitations of the laws at religious festivals. But, once again, for the listener the reception of the law was essentially passive. One listened to the law and maybe an explanation of it by a preacher, and then it was up to the hearer to keep it or reject it as he saw fit (Neh. 8:1–10). As long as he did not publicly reject or break the law, he would be accepted, socially at least.

²⁶ Foreword to *Hymns Old and New: New Anglican Edition* (Bury St Edmunds: Kevin Mayhew, 1996).

Thus receiving the teaching of the law or the history books of the Old Testament was basically a silent, passive affair.

But reciting the psalms is quite different. The one who prays the psalms is taking their words on his lips and saying them to God in a personal and solemn way. An example is Psalm 7:8–9.

The LORD judges the peoples;
 judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness
 and according to the integrity that is in me.
 Oh, let the evil of the wicked come to an end,
 and may you establish the righteous—
 you who test the minds and hearts,
 O righteous God!

The psalmist affirms that God will judge all the peoples, but then invites God to judge him, despite affirming that God tests the minds and hearts. It is a challenging and disturbing prayer: does every worshipper really want God to test his innermost motives? But time and again in the Psalms we meet this sort of prayer. The reciter or singer is thus involved in giving very active assent to the standards of life implied in the Psalms.

The closest analogy in Scripture to this affirmation of standards I think is found in Deuteronomy 27. There in a ceremony to be performed shortly after entry into the Promised Land, all the tribes stand before the Levites, who then pronounce curses on certain types of, mostly secret, sins.

“Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image,
 . . . and sets it up in secret.” . . .
 “Cursed be anyone who dishonors his father or his
 mother.” . . .
 “Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road.”
 (Deut. 27:15–16, 18)

After each curse, “all the people shall say, ‘Amen’” (v. 18).

But even saying “amen” to a curse seems to me semi-passive,

when compared with reciting the psalm. When you pray a psalm, you are describing the actions you will take and what you will avoid. It is more like taking an oath or making a vow.

Austin pointed out that many remarks are much more than statements about facts, which are either true or false. We have already noted that promises change a situation by imposing obligations on the speaker and creating expectations in the listener. A promise is an example of a speech act. Wedding vows are speech acts too. The key words in a marriage ceremony are spoken publicly and before God. “I A take you B to be my wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.”

One trusts that brides and grooms pronounce these words after careful thought beforehand and with complete sincerity on the big day. The words themselves transform their status: the two become man and wife. Thus the words are performative.²⁷ They change the situation. Speech-act philosophers have refined our understanding of illocutionary acts. According to Searle some utterances are directives: that is, they ask someone to do something.

Save me, O God!

For the waters have come up to my neck. (Ps. 69:1)

Other speech acts are commissive: the speaker promises to do something.

I said, “I will guard my ways,
that I may not sin with my tongue;
I will guard my mouth with a muzzle,
so long as the wicked are in my presence.” (Ps. 39:1)

Yet others are expressive: they express the emotion the speaker feels.

²⁷ P. Ramsey, “Liturgy and Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 2 (1979): 139–71, argued that many liturgical remarks are performative; see 145–46.

O Lord, all my longing is before you;
my sighing is not hidden from you. (Ps. 38:9)

And other speech acts are declarative: their very utterance effects a change.

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession. (Ps. 2:8)

Searle, whose classification I have just used, points out that “often we do more than one of these things in the same utterance.”²⁸ Using this categorization of speech acts, I suspect that one could say that praying the psalms involves the worshipper in many commissive speech acts: the psalms as prayers are really a series of vows. This is what sets them apart from other biblical texts with an ethical dimension.

One of the earliest writers to apply speech-act theory to the language of worship was Donald Evans in *The Logic of Self-Involvement*. Though he does not specifically discuss the language of the Psalms, his more general observations are most pertinent to our discussion. Evans does not use the more nuanced analysis of speech acts of Searle, but builds on Austin’s simpler understanding of performative acts. He argues that most theological statements from a believer have a stronger or weaker commissive sense. This observation, I believe, aptly describes the situation of those praying the psalms. It is particularly pertinent to a study of the ethics of the Psalms.

Evans begins by noting that when God addresses mankind, he makes a commitment, and when man addresses God, there is a commitment in response.

Similarly man does not (or does not merely) assert certain facts about God; he addresses God in the activity of worship, com-

²⁸ J. R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 29, quoted by R. S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 50.

mitting himself to God and expressing his attitude to God. In so far as God's self-revelation is a self-involving verbal activity ("His Word is claim and promise, gift and demand") and man's religious language is also a self-involving verbal activity ("obedient, thankful confession and prayer"), theology needs an outline of the various ways in which language is self-involving.²⁹

Evans's book attempts to provide such an analysis of how the language of worship involves the worshipper. He adopts the terminology of Austin, the founder of speech-act theory, to define the character of worship language. Evans argues that this language falls into two main categories: commissives, in which the speaker commits himself to a course of action, and behabitives, in which an attitude is expressed. Typical commissives are *promise, pledge, accept, undertake, engage, threaten, swear loyalty, declare as policy, and take as wife*. Behabitives include such terms as *praise, thank, apologize, commend, blame, reprimand, glorify, worship, confess, welcome, protest, and accuse*.³⁰ Obviously both commissives and behabitives are found throughout the Psalter. For example:

But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
will enter your house.

I will bow down toward your holy temple
in the fear of you. (Ps. 5:7)

I will give to the LORD the thanks due to his righteousness,
and I will sing praise to the name of the LORD, the Most
High. (Ps. 7:17)

Evans says that statements like "I promise/pledge" "are Commissive performatives, for the speaker *commits* himself in more than a verbal way. They have a 'content,' for the speaker is under-

²⁹ Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement: A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator* (London: SCM, 1963), 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29

taking to behave in a specified way in the future; for example, he is undertaking to ‘return this book tomorrow.’”³¹

God’s promises are commissives. For example:

I will tell of the decree:

The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;

today I have begotten you.

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,

and the ends of the earth your possession.” (Ps. 2:7–8)

Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;

I will protect him, because he knows my name. (Ps. 91:14)

These divine commitments evoke a human response. In fact many of the psalms quote divine promises in the psalmists’ prayer and praise. Following Austin’s terminology, Evans calls sentiments such as “I thank you,” “we praise thee, O Lord,” and “I apologize” *behabitives*,

since they related the speaker to another person in the context of human *behaviour* and social relations, without being strongly *Commissive*. The speaker implies that he has certain attitudes in relation to the person whom he addresses, or towards what he is talking about. In saying, “I thank you,” I imply (but do not report) that I am grateful to you; In saying, “I apologize for my behaviour,” I imply (but do not report), that I have an unfavourable attitude towards my behaviour. *Behabitives* imply attitudes.³²

Evans argues that since most language about God is either *commissive* or *behabitive*, it is therefore self-involving. Self-involvement is particularly evident in first-person utterances.

Where *I* report my attitude in the present tense, my utterance is rarely a mere report, equivalent to *your* report of my attitude. It

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32

³² *Ibid.*, 34–35.

tends to *commit* me to the pattern of behaviour to which I am referring; it has a forward reference to behaviour for which I am the responsible agent, not merely an observer.³³

Many psalms illustrate this. For example:

Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together!

I sought the LORD, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.
Those who look to him are radiant,
and their faces shall never be ashamed. (Ps. 34:3–5)

I waited patiently for the LORD;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the pit of destruction,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the LORD. (Ps. 40:1–3)

Many remarks that on first sight seem to be mere statements of fact, constatives, within the context of worship have clearly performative force. According to the Old Testament, Evans observes, “man in general is created with a role as nature’s steward and God’s articulate worshipper. In the biblical context, to say, ‘God is my Creator’ is to acknowledge the *role* which God has assigned.”³⁴ To say “I acknowledge you as my king” or “You are my king” is to express a strong commitment.³⁵ The so-called enthronement psalms offer many examples of this.

³³ Ibid., 119.

³⁴ Ibid., 155.

³⁵ Ibid., 52–53.

For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods. (Ps. 95:3)

The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad! (Ps. 97:1)

The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!
(Ps. 99:1)

These “Commissives are utterances in which the speaker commits himself to future patterns of more-than-merely-verbal behaviour.”³⁶

Even remarks like “God is holy” in a song of praise to God are more than a statement of God’s attribute of holiness. They express a certain sense of awe in the worshipper.

In the biblical context, to say, “God is glorious,” or “God is holy” is to worship God; it is to express an attitude. As an expression of attitude, the utterance is both performative and expressive:

. . . The words are used performatively to perform an act of praise and to commit oneself to various attitudes of supreme and exclusive devotion.³⁷

Andreas Wagner makes a similar point. In the Old Testament, he says, “every confession of faith in Yahweh carries with it obligations. What is expressed in the sentence following Deut. 6:4 may be implied in all confessions of faith in Yahweh.” Deuteronomy 6:4 runs, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” It continues in verse 5, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Wagner explains that in confessing God’s uniqueness, a person commits himself to God: “In the act of confession are embedded obligations, which one in and through confessing accepts for

³⁶ Ibid., 57.

³⁷ Ibid., 183.

oneself. Confessing faith in Yahweh means loving him and doing all that is according to his will.”³⁸ Psalm 104 fits this analysis well. It begins:

Bless the LORD, O my soul!
O LORD my God, you are very great!
You are clothed with splendor and majesty,
covering yourself with light as with a garment,
stretching out the heavens like a tent. (vv. 1–2)

Then in language reminiscent of Genesis 1 the psalm recounts God’s creative acts, including his provision of food for humans (vv. 3–30). This recounting evokes the outburst:

O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom have you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures. (Ps. 104:24)

These recollections of God’s work in creation then motivate a strong commitment on the part of the psalmist.

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the LORD.
Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more!
Bless the LORD, O my soul!
Praise the LORD! (Ps. 104:33–35)

Evans is quite correct to insist that “in the biblical context, the utterance ‘God is my Creator’ is profoundly self-involving.”³⁹ His further point that the use of the present tense also has implications for future action is also important in singing the psalms.

³⁸ Andreas Wagner, *Sprechakte und Sprechaktanalyse im Alten Testament*, BZAW 253 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 215 (my trans).

³⁹ Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement*, 160.

Where *I* report my attitude in the present tense, my utterance is rarely a mere report, equivalent to *your* report of my attitude. It tends to *commit* me to the pattern of behaviour to which I am referring; it has a forward reference to behaviour for which I am the responsible agent, not merely an observer.⁴⁰

Again many passages from the Psalms could be cited to support Evans's contention. For example Psalm 116 begins,

I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy. (v. 1)

Then after an extended account of how God has answered his prayer, the psalmist promises,

I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,
in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD! (vv. 18–19)

A similar pattern is discernible in Psalm 118.

To sum up, singing or praying the psalms is a performative, typically a commissive, act: saying these solemn words to God alters one's relationship in a way that mere listening does not. This is not a new insight: St. Paul saw confession of faith as altering one's status before God: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom. 10:9–10).

Paul's argument may be applied to the Psalms. Throughout the Psalter one is confessing that the Lord is God, and as the Psalms often insist, this is supposed to be a confession that comes

⁴⁰ Ibid., 119. Wagner, 98, notes that explicitly performative utterances in Hebrew are generally put in the first person perfect.

from a pure and sincere heart. And it is certainly salvation that the Psalmist seeks: time and again he pleads to God to save him, to deliver him, to hear his prayer, and so on. Whether or not this always occurs is not my purpose to discuss now. I simply want to draw out some of the similarities between taking an oath, making a vow, confessing faith, and praying the psalms. I think these parallels may help us to see how powerful the commitment is that the psalms demand of their user. In singing the psalms, one is actively committing oneself to following the God-approved life. This is what we are doing singing the psalms.