Introduction to Psalms

Encountering God in the Psalms

The influence of the book of Psalms on Jewish and Christian traditions, both in terms of the worship of the community and the spiritual experience of countless individuals, is immense. Some psalms had a fixed place in the great Jewish festivals. The daily morning service in the synagogue today includes Psalms 145–150, and the Sabbath morning service contains a sequence of psalms culminating in 92 and 93 (Davidson, 1998:1).

The Gospels tell of Jesus and the disciples singing “hymns,” likely the so-called Hallel psalms at the beginning of the Passover meal (113–114) and at the end (115–118). The early church was enjoined to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (Col 3:16). Within Christian tradition, many different churches have nurtured worship through the psalms, spoken or sung as invocation, adoration, confession, hymns, chants, and responses.

Beyond the liturgies of synagogue and church, the psalms have been woven into the richly varied experience of countless men and women across the centuries. Martin Luther referred to the Psalter as “a little Bible.” Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic, wrote that the psalms are more than language. “They contain within themselves the silence of high mountains and the silence of heaven. . . . The Psalter only truly begins to speak and sing within us when we have been led by God and lifted up by Him, and have ascended into its silences” (Merton: 160).

This grand collection of psalms is a treasured hymnbook inviting and expressing the people’s praise to their sovereign God. Here is also a prayer book, voicing the needs of individuals and the commu-
nity in times of trouble. Finally, the book of Psalms serves as *instruction book*, as indicated in the opening psalm’s invitation to “meditate day and night” on the life-giving word of God’s instruction for living (1:2; cf. Pss 19; 119).

The reader of these sacred poems soon discovers that a psalm speaks for itself. While the commentary may provide some helpful background, alert the reader to linkage with words and themes, and stimulate the imagination for application, it will not replace repeated readings of a psalm in order to hear God speak through the psalm’s own distinctive structure and world of words. Only through reading the psalms, slowly and reflectively, will we find ourselves in these ancient Hebrew Scriptures, which draw us into the presence of the sovereign God. As these texts become our prayers and heart-songs, we will come to know ourselves more fully and to know God more surely.

The psalms, in their rich diversity, confessional uncertainties, and perplexities, invite us to join Israel in worship. The psalms invite us also to draw on the rich experience of their use in the Christian church through the years. The utilization of the psalms in liturgical settings is not well-known in believers church congregations that generally eschew prescribed rituals. Psalms for specified liturgies are included in this commentary in order to help readers appreciate the diverse and highly meaningful use of psalms in private or public worship in the long history of the church.

### Finding One’s Way Through the Psalms

Of the Old Testament (OT) books, Psalms has a special place in the hearts of Christians. Many copies of the combined New Testament (NT) and Psalms are sold each year. Every believer has a favorite psalm or two. Nevertheless, for many the Psalter is a complex and even foreboding book. Its words convey a wide range of moods, contradictory feelings, and even angry outbursts. Many psalms appear to be haphazardly placed. Some psalms give evidence of worship leaders reworking them to fit new situations. Many images and expressions are difficult to understand. What help is there to guide us through this anthology of ancient poems, which may span a period of eight hundred years?

The word *psalm* is from Greek *psalmos*, “song accompanied by a stringed instrument; song.” This is the term used by the Septuagint (LXX, early Greek translation of the OT) for the Hebrew word *mizmôr*, a “melody, song, psalm.” The Psalter is made up of 150 of these psalms in five books (1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106;
107–150). But there are clues to other subcollections and a complex history of psalm writing, collecting, and editing. The psalms were not produced by poets sitting down to create poems after the fashion of modern poets. The origin of the biblical psalms lies, rather, in the cultic, the liturgical life of a community of faith (Guthrie: 15). In this process, the community often took over and expanded individual prayers for its own use (cf. Ps 130). Many of the psalms come from the time of the monarchy in Israel (David to Josiah, ca. 1000–600 BC). Community laments, some reflecting the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem in 587 (or 586) BC, are prominent in book III of the Psalter. Books IV and V proclaim the sovereignty of God even though the Davidic dynasty had ended. Current psalm studies ascribe significance to the Psalter’s shaping, some taking place after the exile. For further background to psalm studies and a brief history of interpretation of the psalms, see relevant essays in the back of this book [Composition; Hebrew Poetry; Psalm Genres; Superscriptions; Ways of Reading].

Among the many aids to study of the psalms are commentaries such as this volume in the Believers Church Bible Commentary series. A common definition of commentary is “the treatment of individual psalm verses in their specific context” (Keel: 12). Commentaries provide a broader perspective, such as looking at verses in the context of the whole psalm, as well as the psalm’s place in the Psalter and all the Scriptures. Context is important, implying that we take a particular passage as a “text,” a piece of writing with a meaning to be discovered. Often multiple meanings await us. The amazing gift of the Word is that as we bring it to bear on the spiritual experience of persons, it opens new insights for living. This commentary is offered as an invitation to let the Word encounter us. As the Psalter comes from the life of God’s people, so may it point us to the sovereign God and inspire us to greater faithfulness.

The Message of the Psalms: Theological Themes

The book of Psalms is not a systematic theology. Rather, it is a treasury of experiences accumulated by generations of people who nourished their hopes and anxieties as they clung to their values and their faith in God. As such, the psalms contain and reflect on a wide range of topics. One may find lists of major theological themes in the psalms in Kraus’ *Theology of the Psalms* (1986), Allen’s *Psalms* (1987), Limburg’s article “Psalms, Book of” (*ABD* 5:534-36), and Mays’ *Psalms* (1994b:29-36).

The following brief description identifies several themes relating to
God, the human situation, and the people of God, including worship, Scripture, and obedience. The Psalter, as a book about God, extols the LORD as refuge, the incomparable God, and God the King.

The LORD as Refuge

Psalms 1 and 2 provide an introduction to the Psalter as a whole. According to Psalm 1, “happiness” derives from the complete orientation of life to God, including perpetual openness to God’s instruction. Psalm 2 concludes with the reminder that happiness lies in taking refuge in the LORD (2:11). This appeal to entrust one’s whole self, existence, and future to God runs throughout the Psalter (31:1, 4, 6, 14, 19; 52:7-8; 62:7-8; 71:1, 3, 5; 91:2, 4, 9; 143:8-9). The appeal is based on the assurance that the LORD is “my rock and my redeemer” (19:14). These metaphors, particularly prevalent in the psalms of lament, trust, and thanksgiving, assert that God protects and provides security for the individual, and God delivers those who are hurting in situations of crisis.

God as “rock” and “refuge” asserts the trustworthiness of God (62:2, 6-7; 91:2). God as “shepherd” and “host” (Ps 23) conveys the comfort and guidance of the LORD. Many prayer psalms request God’s help. When deliverance comes, the psalms of praise and thanksgiving tell the story of what God has done and invite others to discover God’s goodness (30:2, 11-12; 34:4, 8).

The Incomparable God

Worshippers offer psalms of prayer and praise to the God whose name is Yahweh, the name translated in many English versions as LORD (printed in all capital letters to distinguish the name from the title Lord) [Names of God]. They understand the LORD to be the God of Israel who made his way known to the people from the exodus to land occupancy, through exile and the return. Israel sometimes asked, “Has God forgotten to be gracious?” (77:9; 89:49). These times became occasions to retell the deeds of the LORD during the exodus, and God’s leading through sea and wilderness in proclamation of their God as incomparable and above all gods (77:13-15, 19-20). The LORD has control over nature, turning back the sea, sending rain, thunder, lightning, and earthquake (77:16-18). The psalms emphasize the work of God the creator (8; 19:1-6; 104; 148) and celebrate God’s saving acts in history (78; 105; 106). Numerous psalms portray God as acting in both nature and history (33; 65; 66; 114; 135; 136; 146; 147).

The liturgical cry “the LORD reigns” (47; 95; 96; 97; 99; 103:19-
22) asserts the sovereignty of the LORD as king over the whole earth. The LORD rules over all nations and is active in their histories as well. To live under God’s rule is to live in harmony with all other species of creatures and with the earth itself (8; 19; 29; 104; 107; 148). The LORD will judge the whole earth (96:13; 98:9). The judgments are the providential interventions of the LORD to maintain his sovereignty.

The psalms tell of the attributes of the LORD as “the great king over all the earth.” “His greatness is unsearchable” (145:3) and includes his awesome majesty (97), irresistible power (76), and holiness (99). Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his rule (48:11). Righteousness is rooted in the LORD’s saving actions (7:9-11; 33:5; 99:4). Psalms call the LORD “lover of justice” (37:28; 99:4) and regard him as the source and guardian of justice because justice and righteousness are his very nature (33:5; 72:2; 97:2). They portray God as having a special concern to restore the lost rights of the oppressed (10:17-18; 76:9; 82:1-4; 109:16; 113:4-9; 146:7-9) [Judge, Righteous].

Steadfast love and faithfulness accompany the LORD’s actions (85:10-11; 89:1). Steadfast love (hesed) is the characteristic of the LORD that informs all the others and constitutes the goodness of the LORD (36; 103; 107; 136). Steadfast love means “the reliable helpfulness of the LORD to any and all that are dependent on him” (Mays, 1994b:33) [Steadfast].

God the King

The royal psalms, beginning with Psalm 2, are scattered throughout the Psalter and serve to articulate God’s sovereignty. The regent on earth of the LORD’s reign is the Davidic king, designated as the “anointed” by the LORD’s covenant (89; 132). The king is to represent the divine rule to the people of the LORD and to the nations (2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 110). Peace is the basic theme involved in the activity of the king (72:1-7). The royal psalms and songs of Zion make it clear that God’s rule is constantly opposed (46:6; 48:4-5; 76:7-9).

Israel asserted “the LORD is king” (93; 95–99), emphasizing God’s universal reign amid circumstances that seemed to deny it. Thus the psalms affirm God’s reign as a present reality. At the same time, the royal psalms, which speak of the king as being “the anointed” (2:2; 18:50; 20:6; 89:38, 51; 132:10, 17), became the seedbed out of which grew Israel’s messianic hope as articulated by the prophets (Isa 9:1-7; 11:1-10; Jer 23:1-8; Mic 5:2-6; Zech 9:9-10; Limburg, ABD, 5:536). The NT declares that these promises find their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth (Matt 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-22). See “Royal” and “The LORD is King” in the essay Psalm Genres.
The Human Situation

The Psalter, a book about God, also contains themes relating to the human situation. Many of the psalms, particularly the wisdom psalms, deal with the mysteries of life and death. Some are pessimistic about the human situation, expressing the view that “mortals . . . are like the beasts that perish” (49:12). Bemoaning human frailty (90:3-10), they nevertheless point toward hope. If humans cannot ransom themselves from death’s power, God can and will do so (49:15).

Reflections on life’s mysteries wrestle with the problem of the success of the wicked (37; 73). Wisdom psalms, however, also comment on the blessing of life in the midst of the family and the community of worshippers (127; 128; 133). The psalms express amazement at the significance of human life as God’s creation and gift (8; 104; 139).

Yet the human predicament is ever present. The people in the psalms are affected “by finitude and fallibility, by mortality and vulnerability and sinfulness” (Mays, 1994b:34). God’s people encounter the opposition of nations and rulers and people whose gods and power and autonomy are rebuked by the reign of God (Pss 9–10). The servant of the LORD encounters the hostility of enemies. The servants and the enemies are frequently called the “righteous” and the “wicked” to characterize them in terms of conduct. In the vocabulary of the psalms, “the faithful” (85:8; 86:1-4; 116:15) are “those who fear the LORD” (85:9; 135:20). The righteous are persons who acknowledge their dependence upon God and preserve the peace and wholeness of the community by fulfilling the demands of communal living (15:1-5; 24:3-6). Righteousness is the standard not only for a person’s relationship to God, but also for interrelationships with one another (Rad, 1962:370). However, this ongoing conflict gives rise to the many prayers for refuge, deliverance, and salvation [Enemies; Sin; Wicked].

The Community of the People of God

Beyond the cry of individuals, the psalms are also the expression of the community. The people speaking in the psalms call themselves “the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” (95:7). The LORD redeemed them to be the tribe of his heritage (74:2). God’s way with them in the past provides the key to God’s continuing presence (44; 74; 77; 78; 80; 105; 106).

The community is related to the understanding of God’s justice, implying that the psalms are not simply individualistic or otherworldly. The psalms “insist upon equity, power and freedom enough to live one’s life humanely,” but in solidarity with all those who hope for justice
and liberation (Brueggemann, 1984:175-76). Throughout the psalms we hear God’s will for peace, shalom (šālôm). The people pray for, hope for, and await peace for the land and for the whole earth (29:11; 34:14; 85:8, 10; 120:6-7; 122:6-8; 147:14). The community of God’s people, through its members with their different gifts and callings, can lead the life that constitutes the human response to God. The psalms give witness to the reality of Israel, a people chosen and caught up in community and in faithfulness to the covenant, people who have a mission to all peoples and nations (57:9-11; 67:1-7; 96:1-4; 108:3-4).

The Vitality of Worship

The psalms are rooted in worship and shaped by worship. Worship is the community’s response to God and what God has been doing. The cultic community of Israel gathered at the holy place in Jerusalem (84:1-4; 122:1-5). “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth” (50:2). Israel, assembled in worship at the holy place, is the answering community (148:14). Here the prayers of God’s people arise anew (80:4; 118:1-4; 124:1; 129:1).

Central to worship are hymns of praise (Pss 100; 103; 113) and thanksgiving (30:4-5; 116:5, 12; 118:26-29; 136). But so also are the laments that call forth petition (22:1-2; 77:7-9; 130:1-2). These cries, out of the depths of suffering, often move to praise for past deliverance (22:23-24; 28:6-7; 86:5, 15). To praise God is the destiny of God’s people, because praise includes the confession that they are dependent upon the LORD, and that everything they have received or will receive is the result of his goodness as creator.

The worshipping community expects and prays for blessing from the LORD (3:8; 29:11; 67:1, 6-7; 118:26; 128:5; 129:8). Gathering in worship renews hope (96:1; 98:1; 115:9; 130:7-8; 149:1). The doxologies of God’s people testify that wonders have not ceased and that hope is authentic.

The Psalms as Scripture

To differentiate, bless, and govern his people, the LORD has given them his torah (tôrâ) (instruction/law) in word, decrees, commandments, and statutes (Pss 1; 19; 119). The torah is an instrument of salvation (94:12-15). The LORD’s law is the norm of their faithfulness (25:10; 50:16-17; 103:17-18; 112:1). “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (119:105).

Psalm 1, as introduction to the Psalter, invests the book of Psalms
with distinctive authority, commending it for meditation as God’s word. As prayers of God’s people, the faithful now present psalms as God-centered compositions. The NT received the Psalms as part of the Jewish Scriptures, introducing psalm references with the biblical formula “as it is written” (Rom 3:10; 15:9-11) or “he [God] says” (Heb 1:7, 8, 10, 13).

As Scripture, the psalms move beyond song and prayer; they become instruction in the way of life (Pss 1; 39; 49; 53; 90). Typical homiletical forms of speech developed in communal worship, with descriptive, meditative, and exhortative overtones, often focusing on the “Word of God” or his marvelous deeds (34; 37; 52; 58; 78; 95; 105). Such instructive discourse became part of synagogue and Christian worship (Gerstenberger: 251).

*Instruction and Obedience*

The psalms leave no doubt that Israel’s worship is to result in “justice” and “righteousness” (37:28; 50:16-23; 82:3-4; 103:6; 119:5-7; 146:7; 147:19). The psalm writers warn that the Israelites did not obey the voice of the LORD and interpret the wilderness experience as the result of disobedience (95:7c-11; 106:24-27). In Israelite worship, the LORD speaks to the assembled people (85:8-9). Readiness to hear a prophetic message shows the significance attached to the word of God in Israel’s worship (50:7-15; 81:8-13).

In the Psalter, the LORD is the guardian and promoter of life; death is the constant challenge to the psalmists (39; 88; 139). But life is not authentic without justice. “Equity” and “solidarity” are key theological concepts in Israel’s worship. Social justice is an integral part of the psalmist’s understanding of God’s faithfulness and of human responsibility (9:8; 45:6-7a; 67:4; 72:1-4; 75:2; 96:10; 98:9; 99:4).

In praise and adoration, the worshipping community is fully committed to the LORD, looks away from itself, and fulfills its destiny as the “people of the LORD” (79:13; 95:7; 100:3).

In addition to these clusters of themes, we could add others. This commentary identifies theological themes in individual psalms and frequently relates them to other biblical texts and their use in the church. Two sections, “The Text in Biblical Context” and “The Text in the Life of the Church,” customary features in the Believers Church Bible Commentary, are conflated in this commentary.

*The Psalms and the New Testament*

The Psalms and its prophetic companion, Isaiah, are the two OT books most quoted in the NT. Jesus quoted more often from the
Psalms than from any other OT book. In the NT are some ninety-three quotations from over sixty psalms, amounting to one-third of the OT quotations. The frequency of the use of Psalms highlights the importance of the Psalter for the early church.

Although there are citations from many psalms, Psalms 2, 22, 31, 69, 110, and 118 are particularly important. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus is recognized at his baptism with a quotation, “You are my son” (Ps 2:7; Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22), which is also related to Jesus’ transfiguration (Matt 17:5; Luke 9:35). Several times the NT applies two verses from another royal psalm to Jesus (Ps 110:1, 4; Mark 14:62; Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:11, 15, 17, 21).

The Gospels narrate the passion with quotations and motifs from Psalms 22, 31, and 69. All four Gospels let Psalm 22 shape the account of the crucifixion. The words Jesus spoke from the cross are a quotation of 22:1 (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). This psalm, which ends on a note of vindication and the universal coming of the kingdom of God (22:22-31), is echoed in the passion story as passersby deride Jesus and wag their heads at him (22:7; Matt 27:39; Mark 15:29; Luke 23:35). The division of Jesus’ garments and casting lots for them (Matt 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:24) recall Psalm 22:18, and the demand that God deliver him (Matt 27:43) is like Psalm 22:8.

In Luke, Jesus’ final words from the cross are a quotation of Psalm 31:5 (Luke 23:46), and in John, Jesus’ final words appear to allude to Psalm 31:5 (John 19:30). Psalm 69:21 is in another individual lament that is reflected in the passion narrative (Matt 27:34; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29). The Gospel writers drew upon the three longest laments of an individual in order to relate the story of Jesus’ suffering. Thus, the Gospels (and the whole NT) present Jesus as “the ultimate paradigm of the faithful sufferer,” and it is precisely “Jesus’ faithful suffering on behalf of others that reveals what God is like” (McCann, 1996:674-75).

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (Ps 118:22) are words cited to refer to Jesus’ rejection and vindication (Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:6-8). The messianic overtones are clear in the citation at the time of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Ps 118:25-27; Matt 21:9; Mark 11:9-10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13).

God rules the world (11:15; 12:10; 15:3), and the mention of “a new song” (5:9; 14:3) recalls Psalms 96; 98; and 149, all of which assert God’s reign.

This commentary will give attention to additional quotations and allusions in the NT as we encounter individual psalms. These links are important because the theology of the psalms is congruent with the core of Jesus’ preaching and teaching. The theological heart of the Psalter—God reigns—is the good news that Jesus announced from the beginning of his public ministry (Mark 1:14-15; McCann, 1996:672).

**Suggestions for Use of the Commentary**

This commentary has been prepared in the awareness that many scholarly as well as nontechnical commentaries and introductions to the Psalms are available. Yet, we still need to write Bible commentaries: we always see with some new insights even as we draw on the work of many who have gone before us. The aim of this commentary is to serve as a help for the study of the psalms by pastors, Sunday school teachers, and others who simply want to read the psalms to gain greater understanding of this rich treasury of the ways of God with his people. It is the writer’s hope that readers will encounter God again and again through the psalms.

The commentary uses the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as the primary English text. It also gives attention to readings in the New International Version (NIV) and other English versions.

**Ideas for Study of a Psalm**

1. Make it a habit to read the text of the psalm before studying the commentary. Reading the text aloud is encouraged.
2. After reading the PREVIEW and noting the OUTLINE, reread the text in order to become more deeply appreciative of the word of God in the Bible. Note the rhetorical form, spot the words that carry the freight (use of the names of God, verbs, repetition), and sense the mood.
3. After reviewing the EXPLANATORY NOTES, read the psalm again. Check the biblical references cited, thus seeing how the larger patterns of biblical theology enrich the psalm and its key phrases. Ask: Who is talking in this psalm? What issues does it raise? What circumstances call forth the faith statements of this psalm? What do I learn about God, creation, and humanity in this psalm?
4. After reviewing THE TEXT IN THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT AND LIFE OF THE CHURCH, think of how the psalm applies to your own needs and aspirations. Read the psalm carefully and prayerfully again, asking: Who would find this psalm appropriate today? What is God saying to me and/or those around me through this psalm?

5. As a further step, you may wish to write your own psalm as response to God. The psalms we write may be as simple as this verse of adoration that a college student wrote on a piece of eucalyptus bark, one Sunday morning by the Sea of Galilee:

The lapping of the water makes me quiet;
the hills around give me strength.
The cooling breeze calms my spirit;
I am at peace. Shalom.

Or our cry out of distress may voice a petition, such as this one inspired by Psalm 80:1-3 (Haas: 54):

God, turn to us;
we need to see your saving face.
Shepherd of our lives,
shine forth with the power of your angels
and save us now!

Using the Psalms

The church has a long tradition of using suggested psalms for seasons and days in the Christian Year. Examples include Christmas Eve and Christmas Day (Pss 96; 97; 98); Epiphany (72); Baptism of Jesus (29); Lent (51; 130); Palm Sunday and Good Friday (22; 31); Maundy Thursday (116); Easter Day (118); Ascension Day (110); and Pentecost (104). The commentary will report other similar connections.

Lectionaries, such as the Revised Common Lectionary, provide a list of psalms that worshippers can use each Sunday over a three-year cycle. These psalms are usually related in theme to the other prescribed Scripture texts. Pastors can profitably use these texts for preaching or for the congregation's meditation or devotional reading during the week.

Psalms form the basis for many hymns used by congregations and choirs. This commentary will identify some hymns relating to a particular psalm. Most hymnals include an index of "scriptural allusions or
references,” which is useful in finding hymns relating to a particular psalm for worship planning or personal reflection.

Prayer psalms provide wording that one can use or adapt for personal or corporate prayers. Reflection on the experience of saying a prayer psalm as one’s own prayer can lead to insights and consideration of the practice of prayer. Examples include Psalms 13; 25; 30; 34; 39; 116; and 130. Eugene Peterson’s Answering God illustrates use of the Psalms as tools for prayer. David Haas in Psalm Prayers has written prayers based on specific psalms. Among many excellent Catholic Church publications encouraging daily prayer based on psalms are Huck’s Proclaim Praise and Psalms for Morning and Evening Prayer.

Finally, the psalms are a rich resource for pastoral care. Examples include meditating on who and what we are before God (8; 49; 90; 139) and on God as creator, provider, and savior (103; 104); crying out in times of distress (3–6; 13; 51; 88; 130); and trusting in God as our help (16; 23; 27; 42–43; 62; 63; 73; 121).

The psalm texts are open and speak to a wide variety of situations in every generation. Here people can hear God’s Word coming to them amid their own needs and joys. Here are the words through which God’s people can continue to offer prayer and praise.