OLD TESTAMENT

Interpreting Psalms and the Psalter

Daniel R. Driver | Atlantic School of Theology

When I teach the psalms, I want students to encounter two major currents in psalms research: the historical profile of individual psalms in interpretation, and the contours of the Psalter as a whole. Work on the former appears above all in specialized studies in reception history, which commonly trace the effects of single psalms as they have supported Jewish and Christian faith in diverse settings, including biblical times, rabbinic and patristic periods, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and so on down to the present. Work on the latter, which we might file under canonical shape and shaping, is well represented by things like the Psalms Section of the Society for Biblical Literature. Unfortunately, very little work has been done at the intersection of these two areas of study. Even in the superb commentary of Hossfeld and Zenger,[1] final remarks on the "Context, Reception, and Significance" of each psalm often read as detachable postscripts to the leading analysis.

Since it is not clear whether these two areas are more than incidentally connected in the literature, how should one bring them together in the classroom? To introduce more recent debate, one might start with the Psalms video produced by the good people of The Bible Project and then move on to current essays like those in a useful volume edited by Nancy deClaissé-Walford.[2] Most students are soon persuaded that the Psalter's order and arrangement have a bearing on the interpretation of individual psalms, at least in some cases.

In parallel, one might also present Jason Byassee's thesis that the church today should read the Psalms like Augustine did in the fifth century, work through parts of Augustine's monumental commentary, and then progress to a broader reception-historical study of select psalms, perhaps as modeled by Susan Gillingham on Psalms 1, 2, and 8.[3] This approach, too, can be rewarding, although in my experience teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels, Byassee is a hard sell and Gillingham is a hard slog. I have had rather more success asking students to study and report on the exegesis of important commentators from the past. Some of my favorite moments in any class have come while discussing a psalm with people who learn to speak for Diodore of Tarsus, Cassiodorus, or the Midrash Tehillim; Aquinas or Rashi; Erasmus or Luther; Hengstenberg or Gunkel. Such a seminar yields wonderfully rich and surprising results. **Ancient voices are often at least as compelling as modern ones, even though it is doubtful that any of them could be revived completely enough to vanquish modern criticism, as a few theologians now seem to hope.**

How much contact is there in the Venn diagram of Set A (the shape and shaping of the Psalter) and Set B (the historical reception of psalms)? In some scholarship, the answer is "none whatsoever." There are some who treat Set A as if its circumference inscribed the entire field, and those whose prioritization of the ancient in Set B excludes newer theories of interpretation. Sometimes the gap is ideological, but mostly it stems from the limits of individual human interest and disciplinary competence. As Rolf Jacobson observed in 2014, after outlining prospects for work in Set A,

> It is time to integrate and test what we know about how the communities were actually reading the psalms with theories about what the final form "means." Are there any congruencies or incongruences between how the New Testament, Qumran, and other first-century Jewish communities were actually interpreting the psalms and the canonical theories about what the Psalter's final form means? Were any of these readers who were approaching the Psalter as a "book" and interpreting in the psalms with anything like what we call "plot" or "characterization"?[4]

Jacobson's timing was poor, since by 2013 Gillingham had already produced a substantial answer to that line of questions, demonstrating how reception history offers an important and neglected control for the current debate. Since then, she has pressed that insight even further.[5]

One of the happiest convergences between new and old involves Gregory of Nyssa, whose fourth-century treatise on psalm titles attends to the sequence and flow of psalms in the (Greek) canonical Psalter. Gregory's approach was well-grounded but by no means universal in antiquity. Some at Antioch even rejected the psalm titles as spurious. For Gregory, however, the beatific scope of the Psalter is opened up by Psalm 1 and purposefully brought through five sections to its proper *telos* in Psalm 150.[6] Gregory thereby anticipates Bernd Janowski's apt description of the Psalter as "a temple of words."[7]

Studying the work of both together—Janowski and Gregory in this example, or, more broadly speaking, Set A duly informed by Set B—should remind us that

innovation may sometimes only rediscover and enrich what has already long been known. While contact between the two areas can be thin, it is enough to compel study of the Psalter as a book with overlapping literary- and reception-historical contours. Ultimately, to ignore either view is to refuse binocular vision. D

[1] Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* and *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150,* Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005, 2011).

[2] Published November 17, 2015, https://youtu.be/j9phNEaPrv8; Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship,* AIL 20 (Atlanta: SBL, 2014).

[3] Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries, Volume One* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) and *A Journey of Two Psalms: The Reception of Psalms 1 and 2 in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[4] Rolf A. Jacobson, "Imagining the Future of Psalms Studies," in deClaisseé-Walford, *Shape and Shaping*, 237.

[5] Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries, Volume Two: A Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1–72* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

[6] Ronald E. Heine, *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 95–96.

[7] Bernd Janowski, "Ein Tempel aus Worten: Zur theologischen Architektur des Psalters," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, ed. Erich Zenger, BETL 238 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 279–306.

DANIEL R. DRIVER'S current projects include essays on time in Genesis and a major biblical and theological study of Creation.

NEW TESTAMENT

Paul's Context-Driven Use of Scripture

B. J. Oropeza | Azusa Pacific University

The famous Don McLean song, "American Pie" can be heard on at least two different levels, depending on the listener's knowledge and experience of popular culture. For the uninformed listener, the song is an imaginative tale about a day when "the music died." For the informed listener, Buddy Holly's 1957 song "That'll Be the Day" is echoed in McLean's lyric "This will be the day that I die"—which alludes to the day Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper were tragically killed in a plane crash on February 3, 1959. From there a constellation of other allusions are detectable in McLean's song, all relevant to popular music and events of the subsequent decade.

McLean's lyrics exemplify intertextuality, the presence of a "text" (or "texts") within another "text." In my view, this literary device functions similarly to the way Paul refers to the Jewish scriptures (the Old Testament). The references operate on different levels for his congregations, who primarily heard Paul's letters read aloud: auditors unfamiliar with the scriptures could benefit from his quotations and allusions that rhetorically support his arguments; auditors who *did* know the scriptures, however, could benefit additionally from their knowledge of the context of Paul's references.[1]

Was Paul competent enough to know the contexts of the scriptures he references? As a former Pharisee who excelled in the Law (Gal 1:13–14; Phil 3:4–6), he would seem to know the Jewish canonical texts very well, perhaps memorizing portions of them. His personal encounter with Christ doubtless compelled him to read and reflect again on the scriptures and how they were to be interpreted in light of his new experience. His interpretation is shared enough in his letters to suggest that he expected his congregations to recognize, obey, and benefit from his references. His use of sacred texts also helped establish his authority as a messenger of God.

Is it plausible to suggest that the recipients of Paul's letters also knew the contexts of his scriptural references? Much depends on *who* the audience is.[2] In Romans his message functions as a gospel written to gentiles and Jews as the implied audience (Rom 1:15–17), and his numerous quotes in this letter reflect recognition that at least some of his auditors knew the scriptures. Differently, in 1 Thessalonians, Paul never quotes scripture (though some allusions may be detectable). This letter is written to recent gentile converts, former idolaters without apparent competency in the scriptures (1 Thess 1:9). The Corinthians, on the other hand, also were former idolaters, but they seem to have learned at least some scripture related to Paul's teaching when he stayed with them for eighteen months (Acts 18:1–18). The moderate amount of scripture quotations in his correspondence to the Corinthians likely reflects their level of competency.

We can suggest that Paul's audiences included listeners at various levels of scriptural knowledge, and (similar to preachers today) he orchestrated his messages accordingly. For his informed auditors, whether many or few, his quotations and allusions