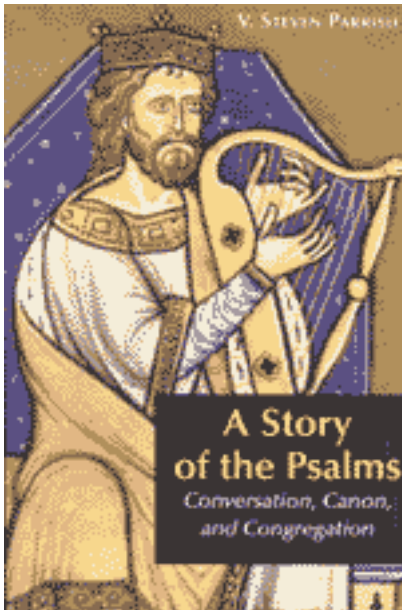


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Parrish, V. Steven

A Story of the Psalms: Conversation, Canon, and Congregation

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V. S. Parrish's essaylike book on the Psalms suggests a thought-provoking and inspiring approach to reading the Psalter. One may not expect a study on the final redaction of the book of Psalms or its historical growth. Without discounting the value of historical-critical analyses, Parrish opts for a synchronic approach to reading the Psalms. "Accordingly, the multiple voices within the Book of Psalms tell a story that is largely concerned with the emergence, establishment, and collapse of monarchic Israel and the reemergence of Israel following the loss of kingship" (143). In this sentence from the conclusion, we have the four key words that provide the overall structure of Parrish's book: *emergence*, *establishment*, *collapse*, and *reemergence*. In short, one could say that Parrish reads the Psalter as a story about the history of Israel, for he sees the "plot" (see 7–11) of the Psalter as converging with the crucial episodes in Israel's life.

But Parrish also goes beyond a "retelling" of the Psalter. Since the "conversation" of the multiple voices in the Psalter comes to communities of faith as Scripture, or canon, Parrish links his reading with basic problems of today's congregations. Building on James A. Sanders's insights about the canon addressing fundamental issues about identity and direction, Parrish searches the Psalter for possible answers to questions such as: "Who are we and what are we to do?" (viii).

To avoid a possible misunderstanding, Parrish does not turn to the Psalms to seek a simplistic magic formula or ready-made solution to today's problems in a Psalm verse. Parrish does not offer a "program" that any and every congregation can embrace, for such program does not exist. On the contrary, he invites each congregation to listen to Israel's fascinating and complex story as reflected in the Psalms. This careful listening combined with the openness for changes, new insights, and new ways of forming congregational life "might lead to astonishing and enriching encounters with the God of both Israel and the congregation" (22).

Parrish describes his point of departure in the introductory chapter, building on the works of Brevard S. Childs on the Psalms and especially on Gerald Wilson's study *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBSDS 76; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985). A second methodological decision is to apply the insights gained from narrative analysis. The plot of this Psalm-story arises from attending to certain psalms themselves. Hence, intertextuality plays an important role in Parrish's book. He calls it a "conversation" between psalmist and psalmist that comes from the juxtaposition of certain psalms. Since this conversation happens in the canon that provides identity for congregations, Parrish crosses the border of Old Testament scholarship and offers suggestions for reflections on congregational life. For the study of congregations, Parrish draws on the works of Nancy T. Ammerman and others, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), and Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for A New Mission Frontier* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1991). From Mead's paradigms, Parrish sketches "a story of the Psalms" in four stages that converges with "a story of the church" (see 16):

Introductory Psalms 1 and 2	Books 1–2	Book 3	Books 4–5
Emergence—	Establishment—	Collapse—	Reemergence—
Mosaic Faith	Davidic Monarchy	Babylonian Exile	YHWH Reigns
Struggle for Existence	Bold Confidence	Intense Questions and Disorientation	Affirmation in the Midst of Exile

These four key words, namely, *emergence*, *establishment*, *collapse*, and *reemergence*, reveal some influence from the work of Walter Brueggemann and his categories *orientation*, *disorientation*, and *new orientation* (as Parrish admits; see 21). However,

while Brueggemann sorts the Psalms into his categories, Parrish honors the canonical arrangement of the Psalms and allows a diversity of expression within the Psalter's story. Within a certain paradigm, for example, "establishment," one can also hear voices (psalms) of protest.

The following chapters illustrate the four stages or paradigms. Special weight is given to the introductory Pss 1 and 2, the "uneasy union of Torah (Ps 1) and monarchy (Ps 2)" (27). Parrish enters a "conversation" among Pss 1 and 2, and Deut 17:14–20 in order to find answers for the ambiguities in Pss 1 and 2 (Which Torah? Which king?). He further relates the first two psalms with the emergence of Israel's monarchy in 1 Sam 8–12, stressing the alternatives between the promonarchical and the antimonarchical material. Psalms 1 and 2 reflect the emergence of Israel from a wilderness band to a people ruled by a king, and in this crucial moment there are alternatives: YHWH/Torah alone? human king? YHWH/Torah *and* human king? Although monarchy has several disadvantages, it might work if the king were a true student of Torah and were concerned to save God's people. A congregation might learn from the story of Israel's emergence that alternatives always exist, along with the need for choices. The struggles to bring old traditions into the present and the future also find resonance in Israel's history, which draws attention to the need for an ongoing dialogue with Scripture, tradition, and context. Parrish opts for an openness to new visions and wholesome change guided by a constant interaction with Scripture and a concern for the well-being of God's people.

Books 1 and 2 of the Psalter consist of voices that affirm and challenge the established institution of monarchy in Israel. These two books are focused upon David and bound by royal psalms (2 and 72). Again, Torah and kingship are linked, as Parrish shows by a synoptical reading of Pss 18; 19; 20; and 21. Although Ps 72 ends the "prayers of David," the superscription "Of Solomon" names David's successor and hence shows that the monarchy moves forward. But the establishment of the monarchy is not the only voice in books 1 and 2. Parrish reads the many psalms of lament as voices of protest: not all was well under "David." He focuses especially on those psalms of lament that bear only the superscription *leDavid* and suggests translating it as "to David." These psalms of lament, these prayers to God, might also be understood as "letters to the editor" or "calls to the talk-show host" in order to say to "David" that all is not well in the kingdom. Hence, although monarchy plays the dominant role in books 1 and 2, the voices of protest are not silenced. A congregation might learn from that observation to listen carefully to the voices of protest in order to pay attention to the real needs of the people.

Book 3 of the Psalter reflects an episode of collapse. Parrish analyzes especially the painful and perplexed voices in Pss 73; 74; 88; and 89. Within this context "lighter lyrics" (Pss 76; 84; 87) sound like false prophecies (like Hananiah in the conflict with

Jeremiah). For today's congregation, Parrish concludes that the time to do "business as usual" has come to an end. The church has to learn from Israel to listen to voices that sing sad songs. Only if these voices come to speak is there the chance of a salvation and rebirth.

Books 4 and 5 of the Psalter reflect the stage of reemergence. Interestingly, the first psalm (90) mentions Moses in the superscription: It seems as if David is replaced by Moses. That alteration might imply that the concept of the kingdom and monarchy is replaced by an act of remembrance. There was a time before David, when there was no land or temple, but even in the wilderness God was known in powerful and foundational ways. Parrish here focuses on Pss 90; 91; 93; 96; 104; 105; 106; 107, 119; 122; 132; 137; and 145. The psalms reflect the efforts of Israel's priests and theologians to search the past in order to explain the catastrophe of the exile and to look for a viable way to the future: "Old texts were heard in new contexts and in this dialectical engagement between text and community, a particular configuration of canon took hold and a new community was born" (131). This observation may offer a model for modern congregations: In rapidly changing social contexts ("ecology"), congregations should think *theologically* about their mission. The two theological anchors Parrish deduces from books 4 and 5 of the Psalter are the confessions that "YHWH reigns" and "YHWH creates." The reactivation of these traditions, as reflected in Pss 90–150, enables Israel's reemergence: "faith in the Creator and reigning God meant that the loss of one particular form of social existence (i.e., monarchy) did not simultaneously mean the end for Israel" (142).

Parrish's synchronic approach to the Psalter as a story offers interesting insights to a possible way of reading the book of Psalms as a reflection of the history of Israel. This is not a suggestion for an explanation of the Psalter's final redaction, but it is a valid suggestion for an intertextual and canonical reading of the composition of the Psalms, thus making sense of the arrangement and the interaction of Psalms and superscriptions. It is also a welcome enrichment that Parrish leaves the ivory tower of Old Testament scholarship by intersecting Israel's story and congregational stories. There is no detailed program that religious bodies can simply appropriate and apply. But with the help of this book, congregations can learn much about a possible way of reading the composition of the Psalter as a reflection of the history of God's people. And in the same stroke they can learn how to reflect their own status, their past and future, and their mission with the help of the book of Psalms.