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"THE ALTAR OF CERTITUDE":
REFLECTIONS ON "SETTING" AND RHETORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALMS

Rolf Jacobson

I was roused by a listless exchange between a boy who wore glasses and a girl who unfortunately did not.

"It's Foucault's Pendulum," he was saying. "First tried out in a cellar in 1851, then shown at the Observatoire, and later under the dome of the Pantheon with a wire sixty-seven meters long and a sphere weighing twenty-eight kilos. Since 1855 it's been here, in a smaller version, hanging from that hole in the middle of the rib."

"What does it do? Just hang there?"

"Well, because a point...the central point, I mean, the one right in the middle of all points you see...it's a geometric point; you can't see it because it has no dimension, and if something has no dimension, it can't move, not right or left, not up or down. So it doesn't rotate with the earth. You understand? It can't even rotate around itself. There is no 'itself.'"

"But the earth turns."

"The earth turns, but the point doesn't. That's how it is. Just take my word for it."

"I guess it's the Pendulum's business."

Idiot. Above her head was the only stable place in the cosmos, the only refuge from the damnation of the panta rei, and she guessed it was the Pendulum's business, not hers. A moment later the couple went off—he, trained on some textbook that had blunted his capacity for wonder, she, inert and insensitive to the thrill of the infinite, both oblivious of the awesomeness of their encounter—their first and last encounter—with the One, the Ein-Sof, the Ineffable. How could you fail to kneel down before the altar of certitude?[1]

1. *The Place of Setting in Rhetorical Analysis*

The focus of this essay is the place of setting in rhetorical analysis of the Psalms. At first blush, this may seem an odd focus for an essay on rhetorical analysis. Does not the concept of "setting" belong more properly in the realm of form-critical study of the Bible? In a word: No. The concept of setting has as much to do with rhetorical analysis as it does with formal analysis. This is so because, as the title of Muilenburg's famous article, "Form Criticism and Beyond," indicates, there is no clear division between formal and rhetorical

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1. Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum* (trans. W. Weaver; New York: Random House, 1989), 5–6.

analysis.[2] Muilenburg's aim was "not…to offer an alternative to form criticism or a substitute for it, but rather to call attention to…supplement our form-critical studies."[3] And as Muilenburg noted, "form and content are inextricably related. They form an integral whole. The two are one. Exclusive attention to *Gattung* may actually obscure the thought and intention of the writer or speaker."[4] If one flips this last statement around, it is no less true: exclusive attention to rhetorical features (to linguistic patterns, structural elements, rhetorical devices, and so on) may actually obscure the thought and intention of the writer or speaker. Thus, attention to a poem's rhetoric *requires* attention to setting. Otherwise, rhetorical criticism might be reduced to some sort of empty aesthetic appreciation.

Which begs a bigger question: What is rhetorical analysis of a biblical text? Or, better: If rhetorical analysis is about more than mere aesthetics, what is it about? How should an interpreter understand what rhetorical analysis is trying to accomplish? Toward what goal or goals is rhetorical analysis aimed?

According to Aristotle's famous dictum, rhetoric is "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion."[5] If rhetorical analysis were to take Aristotle's rubric as the point of departure, rhetorical analysis of a biblical text then could be conceived as analyzing the "available means" that a given text uses to "persuade" in a "given case." *But such a conception of rhetorical analysis would be insufficient, because not all texts intend to persuade.* Yes, there are many biblical texts that were written or spoken to persuade. But what of psalms of praise? Or entrance liturgies? Or rites of forgiveness? Or statutes and ordinances? Or prophetic oracles of salvation? It is not sufficient to understand the aim of all biblical texts as trying to persuade. And thus it is not adequate to shackle rhetorical analysis of a biblical text solely to the post of persuasion.

For the purposes of this study, *rhetorical analysis will be understood as the task of analyzing how a biblical text does what it is trying to do.* As Wayne Booth has written, "Rhetorical study is the study of use, of purpose pursued, targets hit or missed, practices illuminated…"[6] This conception of the task is economically concise, yet allows for interaction with texts that try to do other than persuade. For example, it is my contention that prophetic oracles of salvation do not primarily aim to persuade. Isaiah 40 or Ezekiel, for example, might be said to be aiming to create hope *ex nihilo* in a population whose hope has died. The collections of biblical law, likewise, do not primarily attempt to persuade. A part of what they are doing, surely, is teaching a people how to interpret the law and apply the law in different settings and circumstances.

All of this brings us back to the concept of *setting*. Recall that Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of observing *in any given* case the available means of persuasion." That is, as Aristotle was keenly aware, the rhetorical powers of a speaker or text are never abstract, disembodied, unconnected from

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2. James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969): 1–18.

3. Ibid., 18.

4. Ibid., 5.

5. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, ch. 2.

6. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 441.

real life situations. Rather, *a rhetorical act assumes, in Aristotle's words, a "given case," a setting.* One cannot hope to begin to analyze what a text is trying to do without some concept of a setting in which to frame the exegetical data that one generates.

This is not a new insight. Proponents of rhetorical analysis have understood the need for comprehending a text's setting. George Kennedy—followed by Wilhelm Wuellner, Karl Möller, and others—identified a five-step approach to rhetorical analysis:[7]

1. Delineate the text or rhetorical unit.[8]
2. Determine the *"rhetorical situation* that occasioned the utterance."[9]
3. Investigate the genre.
4. Analyze the rhetorical strategy.
5. Judge the effectiveness.

The obvious observation that must be made here is that the above five steps share a great deal with traditional form-critical approaches to the Bible, especially to the Psalms. Steps 1–3 would surely be recognizable to any form critic.[10] Steps 4–5 may be articulated slightly differently than traditional form critics would do, but I know of no form critic who does not pay at least implicit attention to rhetorical strategies or engage in evaluating a text's meaning.

But the focus of the present investigation is on the second of the above five steps: the *rhetorical situation or setting of a text.* The point, again, is that rhetorical analysis as traditionally formulated assumes the necessity for the interpreter to identify "the specific condition or situation that prompts a specific oral or textual utterance."[11] As Bitzer has written, the rhetorical situation is the context that "calls the discourse into existence." It consists of the "natural context of person, events, objects, relations."[12] As such, analysis of the rhetorical situation is in keeping with Aristotle's rubric that rhetoric has to do with a "given case."

7.   George Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Wilhelm Wuellner, "Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?," *CBQ* 49 (1987): 448–63; Karl Möller, *A Prophet in Debate: The Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Book of Amos* (JSOTSup 372; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

8.   Muilenburg also identified this as the first step of rhetorical analysis ("Form Criticism and Beyond," 8–9).

9.   Möller, *A Prophet in Debate*, 38 (emphasis in original).

10.   It is true, of course, that what is meant by genre differs wildly. Traditional rhetorical critics, following Aristotle and the Greeks, conceived of only three genres: judicial, deliberative, and epideictic (whose respective settings are the court, the legislative assembly, and the public forum). Biblical scholars including psalms scholars, of course, have understood genre much differently. Möller (*A Prophet in Debate*, 40) struggles to place his application of rhetorical analysis under the umbrella of deliberative rhetoric. I will not enter into such a debate here; it suffices to note that the methodological approaches of rhetorical analysis and form-critical study of the Psalter at least share significant affinities.

11.   Ibid., 38.

12.   L. F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," in *Rhetoric: A Tradition in Transition—In Honor of Donald C. Bryant* (ed. W. R. Fisher; East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974), 247–60 (251, 252).

2. *The Place of Setting in Psalms Scholarship*

Those familiar with psalms interpretation will already know that setting has played and continues to play a major role in the interpretation of the Psalms. But the problem is this: no consensus exists in scholarship regarding either what the rhetorical setting of various psalms is or regarding what methodological approaches will best help determine those rhetorical settings.

This lack of consensus, however, is not due to a lack of proposals. The proposals about how to frame and understand the rhetorical setting of the psalms are nearly legion. For the purposes of this essay, one can understand these proposals as falling broadly into three categories. First, there are approaches that have understood the rhetorical setting *historically*. Second, there are approaches that have understood the rhetorical setting *theologically*. Third, there are approaches that have understood the rhetorical setting *canonically*.

a. *Historical Approaches*

A first set of approaches consists of those that have understood the challenge historically. In these approaches, scholars have conceived of the challenge of discerning the "rhetorical situation that occasioned the utterance" in a quite literal, historical fashion. They sought to decipher who the psalmist must have been, what situation it was in which the psalmist found himself or herself, where the psalmist was located, who surrounded the psalmist, and so on.

This type of approach has come in many forms. In a very broad sense, this approach was already at work before the biblical canon was closed, as is apparent in the impulse to identify some of the psalms to historical incidents in the life of David. There are thirteen such psalms in the Masoretic textual tradition (Pss 3; 7; 18; 34; 51; 52; 54; 56; 57; 59; 60; 63; 142). The Septuagint textual tradition further shows this impulse operating, because in the Greek translation additional psalms bear such historical superscriptions (cf. Pss 71 [70]; 97 [96]). What is occurring here is the pairing of a poem with a "rhetorical situation," namely, some event in the life of David.

In the modern period, there have been a number of proposals for understanding a historical rhetorical setting for the Psalms. Most famously, Hermann Gunkel argued that the setting of the Psalms was in the cult of ancient Israel: "we may dare to presume that [the Psalms] arose in the cult of Israel originally."[13] Gunkel believed that the poetic expressions of the Psalms derived from cultic formulas. For Gunkel, form and function—that is, genre and setting— were seamlessly connected. A genre implied a specific life setting from which it could not be abstracted. In Gunkel's view, however, the majority of the extant psalms were not ever actually used in the cult; rather, they were literary creations—spiritual imitations—that were patterned after actual prayers and songs.

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13.   Hermann Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms* (comp. Joachim Begrich; trans. James D. Nogalski; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998), 7.

Another type of historical approach to conceiving the rhetorical setting of the psalm is represented by Sigmund Mowinckel, Artur Weiser, and others. Mowinckel followed Gunkel to a degree, but rejected Gunkel's view that most of the psalms were imitations of actual cultic poems. Mowinckel demanded that "a cultic interpretation...means setting each one of them in relation to the definite cultic act...to which it belonged."[14] Mowinckel placed many of the Psalms within an annual New Year's "Enthronement of YHWH Festival," which he argued was the cultic setting in which (following Mowinckel's sequence) Pss 47; 93; 95–100; 8; 15; 24; 29; 33; 46; 48; 50; 66A; 75; 76; 81; 82; 84; 87; 118; 132; 149; 120–34; 65; 67; and 85 were to be placed.[15] In a similar vein, Weiser placed many of the psalms in an annual Covenant Renewal Festival.[16] Other similar proposals exist.[17]

Another approach to understanding the rhetorical setting of the Psalms in a historical fashion is that of Erhard Gerstenberger. Gerstenberger followed Gunkel, Mowinckel, and others in understanding that "psalmic texts and psalmody served the needs of a religious community."[18] He asserted: "Form-critical work must not content itself with an analysis of linguistic patterns...it must take into account customary life situations and their distinctive speech forms."[19] But Gerstenberger diverged from his predecessors by rejecting the idea that the Jerusalem temple during the era of the monarchy was the primary setting for the Psalms. Rather, "the small, organic groups of family, neighborhood, or community" and "Israel's secondary organizations" during the Persians and Hellenistic periods were the actual historical setting for the Psalms.[20] As for the poetic language of the Psalms, he argued that scholars should "not abstract language from its concrete life situations."[21] And again: "While the linguistic, poetic, and literary devices must be taken into account in form-critical analysis, they have to be evaluated in their interrelation with life situations and social settings."[22]

The last historical approach to conceiving the idea of setting for the Psalms that will be mentioned here is the approach of Hans-Joachim Kraus. In many ways, form criticism of the Psalms reached its high-water mark with the final edition of Kraus's Psalms commentary.[23] And yet one can see in Kraus's work a

14.   Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas; 2 vols.; New York: Abingdon, 1962), 1:23.

15.   Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalmenstudien II: Thronbesteigungsfest Jahwäs und der Ursprung der Eschatologie* (Kristiania: Jacob Dybwad, 1922).

16.   Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962).

17.   See the work, for example, of Aubrey Johnson, *The Cultic Prophet and Israel's Psalmody* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1979).

18.   Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1, with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (FOTL 14; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 5.

19.   Ibid., 33.

20.   Ibid.

21.   Ibid., 34.

22.   Ibid., 35.

23.   Available in English as *Psalms 1–59* and *Psalms 60–150* (CC; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988, 1989).

deep awareness that the marriage between form and function in form-critical interpretation was strained to the point of breaking. Kraus recalled that, according to Gunkel, only "such poems may constitute a type as belong entirely to a specific occasion in worship or at least emerged from this occasion."[24] And yet, Kraus noted that some genres of psalms, such as royal psalms, do not consist of *common literary forms*. This means that the marriage between form and function had not been conceived of in a sufficiently nuanced fashion. In terms of life setting, Kraus noted two extreme approaches—if one focuses on the formal aspects of the literature, then the life setting recedes into the background; but if one focuses on the life situation and posits a grand life setting (à la Mowinckel's grand Enthronement Festival proposal), then formally different psalms are dissolved into each other. Kraus sought to navigate a course that would steer between these two extremes by investigating the form of each individual psalm precisely; he then pursued each psalm's literary form in order to avoid the cult-functional excesses. His approach, broadly stated, was to find the life settings of individual psalms.

For those contemporary scholars who still look for a historical approach to framing the rhetorical setting of a psalm, Kraus's proposal is the default setting. Interpreters seek to postulate an original life setting for each individual psalm. Most have given up on trying to postulate one setting from which a genre of psalms emerged or one grand liturgical festival setting in which to contextualize many psalms. The historical approach to setting that operates is by and large a micro-conception of the concept: the search for the historical setting of each individual psalm.

b. *Theological Approaches*. A second set of approaches to the issue of setting consists of those approaches that have sought to contextualize the rhetorical setting of the Psalms in a *theological* manner. At the outset, for some, it may be surprising to suggest that there is some way other than the historical in which to understand the setting of a text. After all, this essay defined setting above as "the specific condition or situation that prompts a specific oral or textual utterance."[25] But as Wuellner noted, setting, or "context" as he names it here, need not be understood in a narrowly historical fashion:

> By "context" is meant more than historical context or literary tradition or genre or the generic *Sitz im Leben*... A text's context means for the rhetorical critic the "attitudinizing conventions, precepts that condition (both the writer's *and* the reader's) stance toward experience, knowledge. Tradition, language, and other people." Context can also come close to being synonymous with...the "ideology" of, or in, literature.[26]

An aside. It should be emphasized at this point that no absolute division exists between the historical approaches outlined above and either the theological or canonical approaches that will be outlined below. Many interpreters who

24. Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 38.
25. Ibid.
26. Wuellner, "Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?," 450 (emphasis in orginal).

operate historically are deeply theologically, and all of those who frame the issue theologically also rely significantly on historical data. However, distinguishing between approaches that frame the task historically and those that do so theologically or canonically is at least heuristically helpful.

Claus Westermann is one scholar who approached the rhetorical situation of the Psalms *theologically*. Building upon Gunkel's basic insight that *in terms of the life of faith*, praise and lament are like the two complementary shells of a mussel, Westermann wrote that "recognition begins to dawn that somehow the observation that the life situation of the Psalms is the cult cannot really be right. For that which really, in the last analysis occurs in the Psalms is prayer."[27] Again:

> It is high time finally to ask soberly what is regarded as cult in the Old Testament and what the Old Testament says about cult. It will then be impossible to avoid the fact that in the Old Testament there is no absolute, timeless entity called "cult," but that worship in Israel, in its indissolvable connection with the history of God's dealings with his people, developed gradually in all its various relationships...and that therefore the categories of the Psalms can be seen only in connection with this history.[28]

Westermann goes on to criticize Gunkel's contention that the hymn grew out of worship. Westermann notes that two of the examples that Gunkel gives of the oldest hymns are those of Miriam (Exod 15) and Deborah (Judg 5)—which cannot "be called cultic in the strict sense" because they occur in daily life.[29] Thus, Westermann concludes: "The Song of Miriam and the Song of Deborah... show, rather, with unmistakable clarity what the Sitz-im-Leben of the hymn is: the experience of God's intervention in history. God has acted; he has helped his people. Now praise *must* be sung to him."[30]

As for the psalm of lament, Westermann argues that "lamentation is a phenomenon characterized by three determinant elements: the one who laments, God, and the others, i.e., that circle of people among whom or against whom the one who laments stands with a complaint."[31] For Westermann, this situation is fundamentally theological: "The lament is an event between the one who laments, God, and 'the enemy.' It arises from a situation of great need and, for the people of the Old Testament, this need took on a three-dimensional character."[32] Note, then, the fundamentally theological fashion in which Westermann construes the rhetorical situation of the lament. It is the rhetorical "situation of great need" characterized by a three-fold relationship between a psalmist, God, and a community.

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27. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 24.
28. Ibid., 20.
29. Ibid., 22. I have offered a similar argument in "The Costly Loss of Praise," *Theology Today* 57 (2000): 375–85. Note that in Westermann's work, he also denies the cultic character of the song of the Seraphim in Isa 6, which Gunkel had cited. It seems to me rather clear that Westermann is wrong in this detail, but this error does not undermine his substantive point.
30. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 22.
31. Ibid., 169.
32. Ibid., 213.

Walter Brueggemann is another interpreter who has framed the rhetorical situation of the Psalms in a fundamentally theological fashion. Building on the work of Paul Ricoeur, Brueggemann proposed that the rhetorical situation of the Psalms be understood in light of "the sequence of *orientation–disorientation–reorientation.*"[33] This sequence is a fundamentally theological and rhetorical framework in which to appropriate the Psalms. Note Brueggemann's thumbnail descriptions of *the situations* of each segment of the sequence:

1. Orientation: "The mind-set and worldview of those who enjoy a serene location of their lives..."[34]
2. Disorientation: "...a new distressful situation in which the old orientation has collapsed."[35]
3. Reorientation: "...a quite new circumstance that speaks of newness (it is not the old revived); surprise (there was no ground in the disorientation to anticipate it); and gift (it is not done by the lamenter)."[36]

It is worth stressing that Brueggemann proposed this typology as "a helpful way to understand the use and function of the Psalms."[37] In other words, Brueggemann's typology is a rhetorical interpretation, since he is fundamentally interested in function. And Brueggemann's typology is fundamentally theological, since in it he makes form-critical categories bow to a theological-experiential sequence.[38]

c. *Canonical Approaches.* A third type of approach to framing the rhetorical situation of the Psalms consists of those who are interested in the canonical shape and shaping of the Psalter. In North America, scholars who have taken this approach have included the likes of Gerald Wilson, Walter Brueggemann, Nancy deClaissé-Walford, and many others; in Europe, scholars have included Erich Zenger, Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, Matthias Millard, and many others.[39]

33. Walter Brueggemann, "The Psalms and the Life of Faith," in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 3–32 (9, emphasis in original). See also his *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985).
34. Brueggemann, "The Psalms and the Life of Faith," 10.
35. Ibid., 11.
36. Ibid., 14.
37. Ibid., 9.
38. Other scholars who approach the rhetorical situation of the Psalms in a largely theological way include J. L. Mays, "The Lord Reigns," in *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); William Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); and Jerome Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (JSOTSup 217; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). I would also place James Limburg's work on the Psalms in this category: *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); *Psalms for Sojourners* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986).
39. Gerald H. Wilson was a pioneer in this research (*The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* [SBLDS 76; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985]); see too Nancy deClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997); Matthias Millard, *Die Komposition des Psalters: Ein formgeschichtlicher Ansatz* (FAT 9; Tübingen: Mohr, 1994). See also J. Clinton McCann, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (JSOTSup 159;

Evaluative summaries of this type of approach are available from Harry Nasuti and David Howard.[40] The approach has gained both momentum and acceptance in recent years, although it has not been immune to criticism.[41] The basic presupposition of the canonical approach is that the only setting for the Psalms that is available to interpreters is the canonical setting of the Psalter. The original historical settings of the individual psalms are no longer accessible. The meaning of individual psalms was "shaped" and refashioned by where and how it was placed in the Psalter. As Brevard Childs wrote, "Then the question arises, did the later refashioning do violence to the original meaning? One's answer depends largely on how one construes 'doing violence.'"[42] Childs concluded, "the original meaning is no longer an adequate norm by which to test the new."[43]

Clearly, the strength of this approach to the setting of the Psalms is that it requires far less speculation than, say, the various historical approaches require. The setting of Ps 1, for example, as the first psalm in the Psalter and thus the psalm that serves as the introduction of the Psalter is given and requires no hypothetical reconstructions. The data are a given. But how to interpret these data? On this, as in all matters involving more than one interpreter, there are multiple views.

In the space allotted here, it is not feasible to review even the major proposals. A brief review of the proposals of Wilson and Brueggemann will suffice to establish the contributions that this approach offers to conceiving of the rhetorical situation of the Psalms.

For Wilson, the Psalter is in its final form "a book to be *read* rather than to be *performed*; to be *meditated over* rather than to be *recited from*."[44] Wilson put great stock in the fact that in the editorial shaping of the Psalter, the Psalms were divided into five books. Wilson noted that in Books 1–3, royal psalms were placed at the seams of the Psalter.[45] He saw a significant disjuncture as occurring between Book 3 and Book 4, most notably in the fact that the last psalm of Book 3, Ps 89, is the dark lament at the destruction of the temple and the end of the Davidic monarchy. The story that Books 1–3 tell is the "celebration of YHWH's faithfulness to the [Davidic] covenant."[46] Book 3 thus ends by naming a

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); K. Seybold and E. Zenger, eds., *Neue Wege der Psalmenforschung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994), and the bibliographies in these volumes.

40.   See Harry Nasuti, *Defining the Sacred Songs: Genre, Tradition and the Post-critical Interpretation of the Psalms* (JSOTSup 218; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 163–208; David M. Howard, Jr., "Recent Trends in Psalms Study," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (ed. David Baker and Bill Arnold; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 329–68.

41.   See R. N. Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (JSOTSup 222; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

42.   B. S. Childs, *An Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 522.

43.   Ibid.

44.   Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 206–7 (emphasis in original).

45.   Gerald H. Wilson, "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *JSOT* 35 (1986): 85–94.

46.   Ibid., 88.

theological crisis: the crisis of the failure of the Davidic theology of pre-exilic Jerusalem. Book 4 responds to this crisis by returning to the older theology of the Mosaic covenant; this is apparent because Ps 90, the first psalm of Book 4, is the only "Psalm of Moses" in the Psalter. There is thus a shift "away from hope in…Davidic kingship back to…direct reliance on God's protection."[47]

Walter Brueggemann has construed the canonical shape of the Psalter differently than Wilson. According to Brueggemann, Ps 1 initiates the Psalter with a call to "obedience" and Ps 150 culminates the Psalter in glad "praise."[48] In between these two poles, Brueggemann sees the key transitional moment in the Psalter's shape as occurring between Books 2 and 3, rather than between Books 3 and 4. "In reading, singing, and praying the Psalter, the most important and most interesting question is how to move from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150, from glad duty to utter delight."[49] In this movement, according to Brueggemann, Ps 73 provides the turning point, the hinge on which the Psalter turns.[50] In Ps 73, a psalmist describes how envy of the soft life of the arrogant had tempted him or her almost to give up on God's *ḥesed*. But then the psalmist went to the temple (v. 17) and there, in an experience of worship and praise, the psalmist "perceived their end." Psalm 73 is the pivot of the Psalter, and v. 17 is the pivot of Ps 73. "Clearly the culmination of Psalm 73 presents faith now prepared for the lyrical self-abandonment of praise. This one psalm is a powerful paradigm for the lyrical self-abandonment of praise."[51]

Without evaluating the conclusions of either Wilson or Brueggemann, we should simply note how different the approach to interpreting the "setting" of the Psalms is in their work as compared to the historical or theological approaches named above. One can hardly imagine a Gunkel, Mowinckel, or Weiser construing the rhetorical setting of Pss 73, 89, or 90 under the terms that Wilson and Brueggemann do. It should be evident that Wilson and Brueggemann are singing the Psalms in a completely different key than Gunkel or Mowinckel. Or, to use the economical definition of rhetorical analysis offered above, because of the rhetorical situation in which Wilson and Brueggemann imagine the Psalms, it is clear that they have a vastly different conception of *what the psalm texts are trying to do.*

3. *Psalm 4: A Test Case in Construing a Psalm's Rhetorical Setting*

Part of the thesis of this essay is that *how an interpreter construes the rhetorical situation of a psalm will to a large extent determine the interpretation.* In what

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47.   Ibid., 92.

48.   Walter Brueggemann, "Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon," in his *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 167–88; Walter Brueggemann and Patrick D. Miller, "Psalm 73 as a Canonical Marker," *JSOT* 72 (1996): 45–56.

49.   Brueggemann, "Bounded by Obedience and Praise," 196.

50.   Ibid., 204–10.

51.   Ibid., 210.

follows, I use Ps 4 as a case study for how scholars actually construe a psalm's setting and for how the judgments about setting control interpretive outcomes. I have selected Ps 4 for this case study for two reasons; first, because there is a large degree of consensus that Ps 4 is an individual prayer for help (otherwise known as an individual lament); second, because there is a corresponding lack of consensus as to its rhetorical setting. In this, it is representative of many psalms. While it is true that for many psalms a rather clear life setting can be posited (such is the case with the Festival Psalms, Pss 50, 81, and 95; although even in these cases, the precise dynamics of what is happening in the festival are unavailable), it is also true that for the majority of psalms, the rhetorical setting is indeterminate.

When it comes to the task of interpreting a psalm (of constructing its meaning), many scholars approach the psalm by first defining its setting in a historical way. With regard to Ps 4, among modern commentators Mays, Clifford, Broyles, Dahood, Kraus, Seybold, McCann, and Hossfeld and Zenger, and others represent this approach (note that Craigie expressed hesitance regarding this approach and Limburg resisted it).[52] The method is circular—the scholar investigates the psalm to determine the historical setting and then on the basis of that judgment, the psalm is interpreted, difficult passages are explained, and meaning is constructed. The promise of this approach was that once the scholar had unearthed the interpretive bedrock of the historical setting, this understanding could function as an Archimedean point upon which arguments for truth could be leveraged. The problem, of course, is that different scholars reconstruct different original settings. For most, such as Kraus and Clifford, the psalm is the prayer of someone who has been falsely accused. But other views have been proposed. For Dahood, it is a prayer for rain, for Eaton and others it is a royal psalm, and for Broyles it is a "liturgical-instructional call to put away false gods." The problem is that one proposed original setting can satisfactorily explain certain particularities of the psalm, while a different proposed original can better explain other particularities—no proposal explains everything completely satisfactorily.

The accompanying chart of Ps 4 (overleaf) illustrates two judgments about the psalm's setting. The middle column illustrates the approach to the situation of Ps 4 as one who has been falsely accused. The setting is assumed to be a forensic worship setting in which the petitioner appeals to God. The speaker is the falsely accused person who most likely has been declared innocent through a

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52. J. L. Mays, *Psalms* (IBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 1–72* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002); Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (NIBCOT 11; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999); Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms*, vol. 1 (AB 16; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966); Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Commentary* (CC; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986); Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT 15; Tübingen: Mohr, 1996); Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Die Psalmen I* (NEchtB; Würzburg: Echter, 1993); J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *NIB*, 4:639–1280; Limburg, *Psalms*; Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983).

Psalm 4	As the "prayer of one falsely accused"	As a "liturgy of instruction to put away false gods"
למנצח בנגינת מזמור לדוד:	Speaker = one falsely accused	Speaker = a liturgist
	Opponents = the accusers	Opponents = worshipers of false gods
	Setting = call to admit innocence	Setting = admission to the temple (?)
2 בקראי עני אלהי צדקי	עני = establish my innocence	עני = typical call to hear a prayer
בצר הרחבת לי חני ושמע תפלתי:	אלהי צדקי = God who pronounces innocence	אלהי צדקי = a relational not a moral or forensic term
3 בני איש עד־מה כבודי לכלמה תאהבון	בני איש = the wealthy	כבודי = my God (cf. Ps 3:4)
ריק תבקשו כזב סלה:	כבודי = my reputation	
	ריק = baseless accusation	ריק = empty objects of worship
4 ודעו כי־הפלה יהוה חסיד לו	ודעו = admit God's verdict	ודעו = prophetic call to obedience (cf. Hos 4:1)
יהוה ישמע בקראי אליו:	יהוה ישמע = God has heard Psalmist's plea	
5 רגזו ואל־תחטאו אמרו בלבבכם		
על־משכבכם ודמו סלה:		על־משכבכם = pagan practices (Hos 7:14)
6 זבחו זבחי־צדק ובטחו אל־יהוה:	זבחי־צדק = sacrifice as a means of acknowledging the innocence of another person in a celebration meal	זבחי־צדק = proper worship of Yhwh
7 רבים אמרים מי־יראנו טוב:	מי־יראנו טוב: = the speech of others who have been accused	מי־יראנו טוב: = the speech of idolaters who look to false gods
נסה־עלינו אור פניך יהוה:		
8 נתתה שמחה בלבי		
מעת דגנם ותירושם רבו:		דגנם ותירושם = pagan fertility worship practices (cf. Hos 7:14)
9 בשלום יחדו אשכבה ואישן	אשכבה ואישן = a reference to waiting for an oracle in answer to the prayer	
כי־אתה יהוה לבדד לבטח תושיבני:		

forensic ceremony; the opponents are those who have accused the psalmist and who refuse to acknowledge that God has declared the petitioner innocent. In this context, the cry to "answer me" (ענני) is said to mean "establish my innocence." God is addressed as "God of my righteousness" (אלהי צדקי), which means "God who pronounces innocence." The enemies are understood as wealthy oppressors (בני איש is understood as a technical term for the wealthy based on Ps 49:3); they are addressed and asked why they assail "my honor" (כבודי), which is said to mean "my reputation." They are said to seek ריק, which literally means "empty things," but in this case is construed as "baseless accusations." The psalmist calls on them to דעו, which is said to mean "admit God's innocent verdict." The psalmist's statement of faith that "The Lord has heard my crying" (יהוה ישמע), is said to be the indication that the psalmist has already appealed to God and has received the answer that he/she is innocent of guilty (presumably this answer came through an oracle of salvation that was delivered by a priest). Finally, the psalmist instructs the opponents to offer "sacrifices of righteous-ness" (זבחי־צדק), which is understood as a technical call for a sacrifice as a means of acknowledging the innocence of another person in a celebration meal. The voice that is quoted in v. 6—"O that we might see some good" (מי־יראנו טוב)—refers to petitioners who have been similarly falsely accused. The closing vow of trust in which the psalmist confesses that he/she will "lie down and sleep (אשכבה ואישן) in peace" refers to the psalmist awaiting a positive answer from God, most likely again through a priest.

The third column illustrates the view of Broyles that this psalm is a liturgy of instruction to put away false gods.[53] Here, the speaker is a liturgical leader; the opponents are worshipers of false gods; the setting is the temple, specifically a liturgical entrance liturgy. The opening cry to "answer me" (ענני) is said to be a plea for God to hear, typical of any prayer for help. The title for God, אלהי צדקי, is understood as a relational term rather than a moral or forensic term. The term "my honor" (כבודי) is said to mean "my God," as the term does in Ps 3:4. ריק does not refer to false accusations but to empty objects of worship. The call to "know" is understood in light of its use in Hos 4:1, where it is a call to obey typical of prophetic calls to obedience (ודעו; cf. Hos 4:1). This approach to the psalm can make sense of the psalm's instruction to "ponder it on your beds, and be silent" (על־משכבכם)—in light again of Hosea, the reference to beds is understood to indicate pagan rituals (cf. Hos 7:14). The instruction to זבחי־צדק refers to worship of the true God—the Lord. The lament—"who will show us good" (מי־יראנו טוב)—is said to be the speech of idolaters who look to false gods for good. And finally, the joy that the psalmist experiences in God is contrasted to the joy of pagan worshipers in their fertility rites: "more than when their grain and wine abound" (דגנם ותירושם; cf. Hos 7:14).

If each of these approaches to the psalm were to paraphrase the psalm, the corresponding psalms might look like this:

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53. Broyles, *Psalms*, 52–55.

Vindicate me when I call,
  O God of my innocence!
You gave me room when I was in distress.
  Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.

How long, O wealthy accusers, shall my
      reputation suffer reproach?
  How long will you love empty lies
      and seek after untruths?

Acknowledge that the Lord has set
      aside the faithful for himself.
  The Lord has acknowledged by innocence.

When you are disturbed, do not sin.
  Ponder it on your beds and be silent.

Offer sacrifices that acknowledge my
      innocence,
  And put your trust in the Lord's decision.

There are many like me who say,
      "O that we might see some good!"
  Let the light of your face shine upon us
      O Lord.
You have put gladness in my heart
  more than when their grain and wine
      abound.

I will both lie down and sleep in peace
      while I await your action.
  For you alone, O Lord, make me
      lie down in safety.

Answer me when I call,
  O God of my righteousness!
You gave me room when I was in distress.
  Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.

How long, you idolaters, shall my
      God suffer shame?
  How long will you love false gods
      And seek after their lies?

Acknowledge and obey that the Lord has set
      aside the faithful for himself.
  The Lord hears when I call to him.

When you are disturbed do not sin
  As you speak in your heart on your
      pagan ritual beds—be silent!
Offer sacrifices to the true God!

  And put your trust in the Lord.

There are many like you who say,
      "O that we might see some good!"
  Let the light of your face shine upon us
      O Lord.
You have put gladness in my heart
  more than when pagan grain and wine
      rituals abound.

I will lie down and sleep in peace.

  For you alone, O Lord, make me
      lie down in safety.

I wish to emphasize that both of these two views are tenable reconstructions of possible historical settings for the psalm (there are also other tenable proposals). However, in my view, neither proposal can be assured. Each reconstruction makes sense of a part of the psalm very well. Each reconstruction must stretch at certain points to make sense of the psalm. Each view must admit that some parts of the psalm make little sense in its reconstruction. Craigie has concluded about Ps 4, "The substance of the psalm is of such a general nature that various proposals for a specific life setting have failed to carry conviction."[54] Even Gerstenberger noted, "Textual problems abound in vv. 3, 5, 7, and the interpretation of one word may alter genre classification" (and thus the reconstructed historical setting).[55]

  For reasons of space, I have limited the illustration to two differing views, both of which fall under what I above termed historical approaches to setting. But from the above descriptions of differing theological and canonical approaches to

54.   Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 79.
55.   Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1*, 54.

setting, the reader should be able to imagine how the interpretive options—and thus the interpretive problems—multiply exponentially once divergent theologically and canonically framed settings are entertained.

The point of this exercise, to repeat, is to illustrate that how an interpreter imagines the psalm's rhetorical setting is in a dynamic relationship with how the interpreter construes the meaning of Hebrew terms, metaphorical expression, and the meaning of the entire psalm. Indeed, this brief illustration from Ps 4 could be multiplied over many, many psalms. The point is not simply that scholars make different judgments about particular psalms' settings. Rather, the point goes to the multivalent nature of all language—including the language of the Psalms. *The words, idioms, and metaphors of the Psalms admit to different interpretations, because those words, idioms, and phrases are illusively multivalent.*

The biblical-interpretive enterprise in its most rigid incarnations responds to this multivalency by attempting to nail down one of the possible meanings and in so doing exclude the others. This attempt, however, must fail because the language of Hebrew poetry will not go so softly into the night. The interpreter, of course, longs to know *which* meaning אלהי צדקי or בני איש or כבודי or ריק or ורעו or ישמע יהוה or זבחי־צדק or מי־יראנו טוב or אישן or אשכבה ואישן was intended by the original speaker of Ps 4. And I find it plausible to assume that the original speaker did indeed intend specific meanings by these words and phrases. Those precise meanings, however, are as lost to us as the Book of the Wars of YHWH. There is no one rhetorical situation that we can pin on any given psalm and thus there is one Archimedean point from which we can hang a universal interpretation of a psalm. There is no cultic, historical, theological, or canonical altar of rhetorical certitude.

4. Conclusion: The Altar of Certitude and Rhetorical Analysis

This essay has attempted to describe, at least in outline form, the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, rhetorical analysis of the Psalms cannot proceed without imagining the rhetorical situation of the psalm. To do so would be to do engage in something other than rhetorical analysis. Merely describing the aesthetics of the Psalms is a worthy task, but it is not rhetorical analysis. On the other hand, there are competing historical, theological, and canonical ways of framing the rhetorical situation of any given psalm. The results of one's rhetorical analysis will depend on how one frames the rhetorical situation. And no one approach to framing the rhetorical situation can claim absolute primacy over others approaches.[56]

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56. Why not adopt a rhetorical approach that intentionally remains open to various readings? That is, rather than argue that one particular way of conceiving the rhetorical situation is true, why not allow for various settings, all the while confessing a degree of humility—admitting that there is much that we do not know and cannot know about how to read any given psalm? Why not adopt a hermeneutical approach to the Psalms that will take joy in their stubborn and inscrutable multivalency?

So, how should the rhetorical analyst proceed?

Rhetorical analysts of the Psalms should pay attention to their own rhetorical situations and aims and *weigh those when considering how to imagine the rhetorical situation of a psalm.* That is, an essay, or commentary, or conference paper, or critical note, or lecture, or sermon, or discussion in which a psalm is analyzed rhetorically is itself an act of rhetoric. As such, it has its own rhetorical purpose (what it is trying to do) and its own rhetorical situation (the "specific condition or situation that prompts" it[57]). When trying to frame the rhetorical situation of a psalm, the rhetorical situation of the analysis should be a part of the conversation. As was argued above, for any given psalm, there might be multiple plausible rhetorical, historical, theological, or canonical ways of construing the setting. Because a rhetorical analysis is itself an act of rhetoric, and because it is neither possible or desirable for an analyst to construct an analysis of a psalm's rhetorical situation in isolation from her or his own rhetorical situation, it seems both necessary and indeed desirable for an analyst to allow her or his understanding of those two situations to inform each mutually. The rhetorical situation that one imagines for a psalm is like the fixed point from which the pendulum—or in this case, the psalm—swings. A pendulum can only swing from one point at any given time. But the pendulum can be moved, can be allowed to swing now from this point, now from that point. To allow that a psalm might swing from another point does not mean that it would not be true when swinging from another point. Nor is there only one universally "best point." There may only be the best point for the pendulum at any given moment, that is, for any given rhetorical situation.

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"You see, Casaubon, even the Pendulum is a false prophet. You look at it, you think it's the only fixed point in the cosmos, but if you detach it from the ceiling of the Conservatoire and hang it in a brothel, it works just the same. And there are other pendulums: there's one in New York, in the UN building, there's one in the science museum in San Francisco, and God knows how many others. Wherever you put it, Foucault's Pendulum swings from a motionless point while the earth rotates beneath it. Every point of the universe is a fixed point: all you have to do is hang the Pendulum from it.

"God is everywhere?"

"In a sense, yes. That's why the Pendulum disturbs me. It promises the infinite, but where to put the infinite is left to me. So it isn't enough to worship the Pendulum; you still have to make a decision, you have to find the best point for it. And yet..."

"And yet?"

"And yet... You're not taking me seriously by any chance, are you, Casaubon? No, I can rest easy; we're not the type to take things seriously..."[58]

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57. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1*, 38.
58. Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, 201.