

three quite general themes: psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of new orientation. It is suggested that the psalms can be roughly grouped this way, and the flow of human life characteristically is located either in the actual experience of one of these settings or is in movement from one to another. By organizing our discussion in this way, we propose a correlation between the gains of critical study (especially Gunkel and Westermann) and the realities of human life (known to those who most use the Psalms in a life of prayer).

(a) Human life consists in satisfied seasons of well-being that evoke gratitude for the constancy of blessing. Matching this we will consider "psalms of orientation," which in a variety of ways articulate the joy, delight, goodness, coherence, and reliability of God, God's creation, and God's governing law.

(b) Human life consists in anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death. These evoke rage, resentment, self-pity, and hatred. Matching this, we will consider "psalms of disorientation," poems and speech-forms that match the season in its ragged, painful disarray. This speech, the complaint song, has a recognizable shape that permits the extravagance, hyperbole, and abrasiveness needed for the experience.

(c) Human life consists in turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy breaks through the despair. Where there

has been only darkness, there is light. Corresponding to this surprise of the gospel, we will consider "psalms of new orientation," which speak boldly about a new gift from God, a fresh intrusion that makes all things new. These psalms affirm a sovereign God who puts humankind in a new situation. In this way, it is proposed that psalm forms correspond to seasons of human life and bring those seasons to speech. The move of the seasons is transformational and not developmental; that is, the move is never obvious, easy, or "natural." It is always in pain and surprise, and in each age it is thinkable that a different move might have been made.

But human life is not simply an articulation of a place in which we find ourselves. It is also a movement from one circumstance to another, changing and being changed, finding ourselves surprised by a new circumstance we did not expect, resistant to a new place, clinging desperately to the old circumstance. So we will suggest that the life of faith expressed in the Psalms is focused on the *two decisive moves of faith* that are always underway, by which we are regularly surprised and which we regularly resist.

One move we make is *out of a settled orientation into a season of disorientation*. This move is experienced partly as changed circumstance, but it is much more a personal awareness and acknowledgment of the changed circumstance. This may be an abrupt or a slowly dawning acknowledgment. It constitutes a

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dismantling of the old, known world and a relinquishment of safe, reliable confidence in God's good creation. The movement of dismantling includes a rush of negativities, including rage, resentment, guilt, shame, isolation, despair, hatred, and hostility.

It is that move that characterizes much of the Psalms in the form of complaint and lament. The complaint psalm is a painful, anguished articulation of a move into disarray and dislocation. The complaint song is a candid, even if unwilling, embrace of a new situation of chaos, now devoid of the coherence that marks God's good creation. The sphere of disorientation may be quite personal and intimate, or it may be massive and public. Either way, it is experienced as a personal end of the world, or it would not generate such passionate poetry.

That dismantling move is a characteristically Israelite move, one that evokes robust resistance and one that does not doubt that even the experience of disorientation has to do with God and must be vigorously addressed to God. For Christian faith that characteristically Israelite embrace of and articulation of disorientation is decisively embodied in the crucifixion of Jesus. That event and memory become the model for all "dying" that must be done in faith. That is why some interpreters have found it possible to say that the voice of anguish in the Book of Psalms is indeed the voice of the Crucified One. I do not go so far, and prefer to say the Christian use of the Psalms is illuminated and required by the

crucifixion, so that in the use of the Psalms we are moving back and forth among reference to Jesus, the voice of the psalm itself, and our own experiences of dislocation, suffering, and death. There are, of course, important distinctions among complaint psalms. Thus *psalms of the innocent sufferer* more directly apply to Jesus than do the *psalms of penitence*. Nonetheless, taken as a whole, that dimension of the history of Jesus is a major point of contact for complaint psalms.

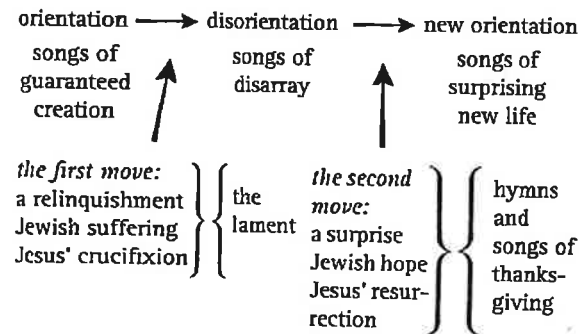
The other move we make is a move *from a context of disorientation to a new orientation*, surprised by a new gift from God, a new coherence made present to us just when we thought all was lost. This move entails a departure from the "pit" of chaos just when we had suspected we would never escape. It is a departure inexplicable to us, to be credited only to the intervention of God. This move of departure to new life includes a rush of positive responses, including delight, amazement, wonder, awe, gratitude, and thanksgiving.

The second move also characterizes many of the psalms, in the form of songs of thanksgiving and declarative hymns that tell a tale of a decisive time, an inversion, a reversal of fortune, rescue, deliverance, saving, liberation, healing. The hymnic psalm is a surprising, buoyant articulation of a move of the person or community into a new life-permitting and life-enhancing context where God's way and will surprisingly prevail. Such hymns are a joyous

assertion that God's rule is known, visible, and effective just when we had lost hope.

That astonishing move is a characteristically Israelite move, one beyond reasonable expectation, one that evokes strident doxology because the new gift of life must be gladly and fully referred to God. For Christian faith, that characteristic Israelite articulation and reception of new orientation is decisively embodied in the resurrection of Jesus. That is why the church has found it appropriate to use such hymns with particular reference to Easter. This means that the use of these hymns and songs of thanksgiving moves back and forth among references to Jesus' new life, to the voice of Israel's glad affirmation, and to our own experience of new life surprisingly granted.

We may chart our way of relating the form of the Psalms to the realities of human experience:



The theological dimension of this proposal is to provide a connection among (a) focal moments of Christian faith (crucifixion and resurrection), (b) decisive inclinations of Israelite piety (suffering and hope), (c) psalmic expressions that are most recurrent (complaint and praise), and (d) seasons in our own life of dying and being raised. If the Psalms can be understood with these knowing sensitivities, our own use of them will have more depth and significance in the practice of both Jewish and Christian forms of biblical faith. In the last analysis, the Psalms have what power they have for us because we know life to be like that. In a society that engages in great denial and grows numb by avoidance and denial, it is important to recover and use these psalms that speak the truth about us — in terms of God's engagement with the world.

5. Before moving to the Psalms themselves, three preliminary comments need to be made.

(a) Clearly the move through this grid of orientation — disorientation — new orientation is not a once-for-all experience. In different ways, we frequently find ourselves in varying conditions in relation to God; but neither do I want to suggest any regularized movement of a cyclical kind. It is not difficult to see, however, that yesterday's new orientation becomes today's old orientation, which we take too much for granted and defend. John Goldingay has made the shrewd point that we not only slide from new orientation to old orientation,