## Allusion and the Psalms: A Response to Papers at SBL 2011by Beth Tanner, Benjamin Sommer, Jeff Leonard, and Hee Suk Kim

## John Goldingay

To begin with Beth: In confess that when I wrote a commentary on Psalm 22, I did not notice that it had the word “roaring” in common with Psalm 38 and Job 3, though I did notice this fact when I came to Psalm 38.[[1]](#footnote-1) Such an experience coheres with some of Beth’s warnings. Her study of allusions to Psalm 22 in the Gospels made me think about the New Testament’s further significant allusion to Psalm 22, in Hebrews 2:12. There Hebrews imagines Jesus taking up the psalm in addressing people who share with him the position of God’s sons and daughters. The words from the psalm are, “I will declare your name to my brothers, in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” Those become Jesus’ words. By turning the psalm’s words into a saying of the risen Christ, Hebrews takes them off the lips of the ordinary person or the ordinary leader, the place where the psalm itself locates them. One could imagine Harold Bloom calling the allusion in Hebrews a strong rereading of the psalm.[[2]](#footnote-2)

One interesting aspect of this allusion in Hebrews 2 is that it is quite unannounced; the epistle gives no clue to the fact that it is a citation from the Scriptures. In this respect it parallels allusions in the Synoptic Gospels to which Beth alludes. In contrast to these, John 19:24 specifically indicates that the event to which it refers, the sharing out of Jesus’ clothes, happens in order to fulfill Scripture. It is in this connection that John also explicitly marks the words from the psalm as a quotation. I wonder whether Hebrews’ omitting to mark a quotation as a quotation conversely indicates lack of interest in the idea of fulfillment, because allusion fulfills a different purpose. It is often assumed that the point about scriptural quotations is to prove that Jesus fulfills Scripture and therefore is the Messiah, but the use of Scripture in that connection is more characteristic of later Christian use than of use within the New Testament. Within the New Testament, the function of the Scriptures is more commonly to enable understanding on the part of people who already believe, rather than to convince people who do not believe.

Hebrews’ referring to Psalm 22 without making the allusion overt is a common feature of Hebrews, and I wonder if the general reason for the allusiveness of the allusion lies in the function of the allusion as interpretative rather than apologetic. Perhaps the author rather hoped that the audience would recognize the quotation and assumed that there was a fair chance that they would do so, but was not too troubled if they did not. It would be significant for the author to be able to link a statement about Jesus to the Scriptures; but more interest attached to the substance of what the psalm said than to the scriptural origin of the words.

A further interesting aspect to the allusion in Hebrews 2 emerges from the part of Psalm 22 from which it comes. It is the first line in the anticipatory praise that occupies the last third of the psalm. I agree with Beth that it would be unwise to base too much on the idea that quoting “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me” implies a reference to the whole psalm. But in combination with the references in the Gospels, this allusion in Hebrews 2 does mean that the New Testament as a whole refers to both major parts of the whole psalm.

As Beth notes, it is particular interesting to consider later Christian linking of verse 18 [17] in Psalm 22 to Jesus’ crucifixion, the line commonly translated to refer to “piercing” hands and feet, especially because the New Testament does not make the link that has seemed obvious to Christian readers since the second century. One aspect of the significance of this instance is that it illustrates the feedback effect of allusion. An example within the New Testament is the way Matthew 2 turns Micah’s “insignificant Bethlehem” into “by no means insignificant Bethlehem.” There is a sense in which allusion by definition involves rewriting as well as rereading, but it is a particularly striking phenomenon when it involves directly rewriting the parent text. At Psalm 22 18 [17], did Christian readers rewrite the text? Or does the enigmatic Masoretic Text reflect a rewriting of a text that was too amenable to Christian appropriation?

Beth’s study made me also reflect on allusions *to* Psalm 8, the psalm on which Ben focused. In Ben’s paper, I appreciated the way he made links with Genesis 2 – 3 as well as with Genesis 1, though he rightly notes that only the links with Genesis 1 really count as allusions. I appreciated his comment that noting allusions helps us perceive the meaning of the text in question. I would add that noting allusions can help us perceive the meaning of the parent text, as Ben shows in his comments on Genesis 1 – 2. Paradoxically, it may do so *both* where it takes up the parent text’s own meaning *and* where it ascribes new significance to the parent text; it then functions heuristically. The New Testament’s use of allusion to the Scriptures can have this effect.

As Ben notes in his commentary, allusions to Psalm 8 already appear in Psalm 144 and Job. Psalm 144:3 asks a similar question to Psalm 8:5 [4]:

 Yhwh, what is a human being that you should acknowledge him,

a mortal that you should think of him,

 A human being who resembles a breath,

 his days like a passing shadow?

Whereas Psalm 8 expresses astonishment at Yhwh’s mindfulness of and attention to human beings in general, Palm. 144 is expressing a *leader’s* astonishment at Yhwh’s acknowledgement of and thinking about him personally as a human being. Why should Yhwh be training the leader’s fingers when Yhwh’s own fingers have undertaken a much bigger project than this leader could ever dream of (compare verse 4 [3] in Psalm 8)? Further, in Psalm 8 the implicit rationale for its rhetorical question lies in the contrast between the immensity of creation over against the lowliness of humanity. Psalm 144 implies a different rationale. Yhwh’s being goes back as far as one could imagine and will go on as far as one could imagine. The human person who speaks in the psalm, like all others, is as short-lived as a breath and lives for only a day. Why should Yhwh bother? Yet Yhwh does so.

Job 7:17-18 is very different. Job asks,

What is a human being that you make him great

 and that you apply your mind to him?

You attend to him morning by morning,

 moment by moment you examine him.

Like Psalm 144, Job speaks of “a human being” but it is his own personal human experience that he refers to; on the other hand, the issue raised for him by the question is quite different. On the usual understanding of Job’s words, he is taking up the phrasing of Psalm 8 and pushing its rhetorical question in a contrary direction, a skeptical one rather than a wondering one. Yhwh’s attending to Job has only negative implications. Certainly this is a very strong rereading of the psalm.

In connection with her study of Psalm 22, Beth suggests that we must give up definitions of allusion that are diachronic and author-centered or text-centered in favor of definitions that are reader-centered. I can see how we might be wise to do so in connection with Psalm 22, but an example such as Job 7 suggests that an author-centered or text-centered understanding can be profitable. One has to be prepared to approach the question differently with different texts.

In the New Testament, oddly enough Hebrews 2 takes up Psalm 8:5-7 [4-6] as well as Psalm 22; indeed, its quotation from Psalm 8 immediately precedes that from Psalm 22. In contrast to the quotation from Psalm 22, Hebrews does introduce the lines as a quotation, but it does so in a way that does not identify the quotation’s source: “It has been testified somewhere,” Hebrew says. Perhaps the implication is that the human author does not matter too much; it is the supra-human implications of the words that are of interest.

Like its quotation from Psalm 22, it uses the lines from Psalm 8 to illumine the significance of Jesus. Hebrews thus goes in for another strong rereading of the psalm. Psalm 8 itself does not look forward to a new age: it has a vision that belongs to this age. It shows us what humanity is, and it invites us to recognize that we can know what human beings are only when we have looked at them in light of God’s creation and of God’s purpose in relation to the created world. It does not refer to the Messiah but places a responsibility on humanity and makes a promise to humanity. Further, if Hebrews sees human beings as almost like gods only “for a little while” rather than “by a little” (so NRSV), this understanding could imply that we were in that position only for the short period before disobedience caused us to lose our sovereignty in the world. It is as if the world “fell” because humanity “fell.” In contrast, the psalm manifests what Erhard Gerstenberger calls an “unrestrained cultural optimism.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Ben suggested that Genesis 1 is tempered by Genesis 2, but as I see it Psalm 8, at least, does not imply that the divine intention laid out in Genesis 1 was devastatingly undone by the subsequent human failure. Human disobedience did not undo God’s placing the animate world under humanity’s authority any more than it eliminated the divine image from humanity (see Genesis 5 and Genesis 9). The psalm does not have a hidden eschatological sense, as Kraus suggests.[[4]](#footnote-4) It has an open sense for this age. It links creation and present experience and it promises that this link still holds. What God intended humanity to be, God still intends humanity to be. If we look one way, at the extraordinary nature of the cosmos as a whole, we can be overwhelmed by our insignificance. God bids us look the other way, at the earthly creation project that God still intends to complete, and in which we have a significant role. Our vocation is to work for the completion of God’s creation project instead of its frustration by acting in a way that threatens to spoil God’s world, as nations in general often do (and not least Christian nations). We can give ourselves to this implausible project knowing that we are working with the grain of God’s creation purpose. We can do it knowing that the cry of suffering children came up to God and made God determined to set up strong barriers that stop opposition powers overcoming that purpose (which is my understanding of the line about babies). We say by faith that God still holds majestic power in all the earth.

The allusion in Hebrews 2 is thus significant for an understanding of Psalm 8 by virtue of its strong rereading, which draws our attention to the psalm’s own meaning by contrasting with it. Similar considerations emerge from Paul’s quotation from the psalm in 1 Corinthians 15:27, where it becomes a statement of the destiny of Jesus to have everything put under his feet.

The observation that the study of allusion helps us understand both the text in which the allusion comes and the parent text gives me a segue into Jeff’s paper. Jeff notes that the nature of traditional historiography is to use earlier traditions, and a narrative psalm such as Psalm 78 does so. Further, like Israel’s prose histories, it does more than simply repeat earlier traditions. On the contrary, the psalmist carefully evaluates, reorders, and explains these traditions, in the course of directing them toward the overarching goal that is particular to the psalm. Study of allusion, Jeff comments, helps us study the history of Israel’s historical traditions in the Pentateuch and subsequently. Precisely by its rereading, the psalm draws our attention to the aspects of the parent version that it changes. On the macro scale, whereas the narrative from Exodus to 1 Samuel is not explicit about what people are supposed to learn from it, Psalm 78 is more explicit. It sees the story as comprising an exhortation to faithfulness and obedience rather than rebellion and defiance. In this respect the psalm’s approach to the story compares with the approach Paul takes in 1 Corinthians 10 when he makes a series of concrete allusions to the narrative in Exodus and Numbers.

The comparison of the Psalm and Exodus raises an issue that links with a point Beth again hints at. Jeff argues that the psalm bases itself on the JE version of the Exodus narrative. But other scholars argue that it is based on the Torah as we have it, or alternatively that the Torah narrative is later than the psalm and is based on the psalm. This raises the question whether the framework of intertextuality is a more promising one for considering the relationship between (say) Psalm 78 and the Torah. I subscribe to the deviant view that we are never going to be able to resolve questions about the history of the traditions in the Pentateuch; more than a century of intense study has produced no clear results and it is unlikely that another century’s study will do better. But in terms of understanding the thesis expounded in the Torah and the one expounded in the psalm, their respective “agenda,” we do not need to know in which direction any dependence lies. Comparing the two can still illuminate each of them. Even if Jeff’s account of the way the psalm has worked with JE cannot be proved, the insight it generates on the nature of both does not disappear.

I’m glad that Hee Suk took up the use of Exodus 34:6 as there is hardly a passage in the Scriptures that generates a more interesting complex of allusions than this one. As is the case with Psalm 8 and Psalm 22, then, considerable interest attaches to the use of the parent text of Hee Suk’s three psalms, the Exodus 34 passage, elsewhere in the Scriptures. It would be illuminating to extend the study of the allusions to the passage here with the diverse allusions in Numbers 14; Joel 2; Jonah 4; Nahum 1; and Nehemiah 9.

I am grateful to Hee Suk for drawing our attention to Childs’s comment that Exodus applies this divine commitment to the community rather than to the individual, but that Psalm 86 is an “I” psalm. If the “I” is the people’s leader, this leader perhaps appeals to Yahweh as representative of the people, but it would not be surprising if the psalm were used by individuals, like other prayer psalms. And this use would suggest a kind of individualization of the divine revelation in Exodus 34. There are thus overlaps and differences with the allusion in Psalm 103, which starts by referring to an individual but goes on to speak of the community and indeed, of the whole world. Psalm 145, too, is dominated by the speech of an “I” but its content would make one naturally think of the whole congregation using it. Yet the uncertainty about the speakers that the psalms directly envisaged reminds us again of the difficulty of an author-centered approach to the Psalms. Which links with the point at which I part company with Hee-suk in his affirmation of approaches to the Psalter that focus on the composition of the five books and the message that might be built into them. I think this study involves too much constructing a picture out of too few dots. But that conviction leaves me out of step, and for the many Psalms scholars who take this approach, Hee-suk’s paper will be especially interesting.

I am grateful for the stimulus of the four papers, for the different approaches they take, and for the way they have focused on individual passages, which preserves the papers from too much abstraction.

1. See John Goldingay, *Psalms* (3 vols; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006, 2007, 2008); at a number of points this response takes up points made in the commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *The Anxiety of Influence* (revised ed., Oxford/New York: OUP, 1997) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Psalms 1*, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Psalms* 1:186. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)