## Psalmody as an Alternative to Theodicy

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Theodicy has become a significant topic in Old Testament study,[[1]](#footnote-1) and the Psalms are a natural work to approach through this lens. They are often concerned with the way Israel or individual Israelites find life not working out as one might expect on the basis of Yahweh’s power and Yahweh’s commitment to them. And several psalms in effect overtly raise the theodicy question. But theodicy is by its nature a theologico-philosophical topic of discussion concerning questions about God’s nature and God’s involvement in the world, and characteristically the Psalms do not exactly engage in such theologico-philosophical reflection, as they do not engage in theologico-philosophical discussion of theology. They engage in theology especially by engaging in doxology, and the dynamic of the theology comes out forcefully in this way. While aspects of the Psalms’ own dynamic and nature do emerge clearly in scholarly theologico-philosophical discussion of theology, other aspects are less amenable to that study. The presupposition of this paper is that the same applies to the Psalms’ approach to theodicy. Whereas the Psalms themselves directly discuss theodicy only rarely, they do address Yahweh and address people over matters that have become the concerns of theodicy, yet their own direct concern is not to find insight on those questions but to give expression to or model or resource a way of living with the experiences that issue in the theodicy question. And for the most part they do it by making it a topic for conversation between Israel and Yahweh, though also a conversation in which Israelites simultaneously address one another. So I here seek to engage with the way the Psalms themselves address Yahweh in praise, protest, and thanksgiving, and simultaneously address people in confession, appeal, and testimony, with an awareness of the issues that modernity and postmodernity raise in discussion of theodicy, but in a fashion not too bound by the framework of that discussion.

## The Good Fortune! (1)

The good fortune of the person who has not walked by the counsel of faithless people!

(Psa 1:1)

I would prefer not to start with the affirmations in Psalm 1, but it seems likely that this portal to the Psalter is significant with regard to our topic. The Psalter’s arrangement suggests the conviction that one cannot properly read or live by the Psalms unless one starts here.[[2]](#footnote-2) And the Psalter thus begins with assertions that contrast with questions presupposed by the protest psalms that dominate the Psalter, the questions that are presupposed by discussion of theodicy. Psalm 1 asserts that good fortune attends the individual who avoids the lifestyle of the faithless and who rather follows the Torah, and it implies no compromise over the assertion. “Everything that they do succeeds” (1:3).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Only in the psalm’s penultimate colon does it offer any account of why that is so. It is “because Yahweh acknowledges the road of faithful people” (1:6). The psalm uses the verb ידע (acknowledge) in connection with Yahweh in the same way as Yahweh himself does in Gen 18:19 and Amos 3:2, to denote a knowledge that issues in a practical commitment. Its statement about Yahweh could hardly be gainsaid. How could anything else be true about Yahweh? So the people of Yahweh may and have to live by this assertion.

Now even if the author of this psalm thought this was simply literal truth, the compilers of the Psalter who followed it with the protest psalms knew that it wasn’t. Yet they affirmed it and placed it as an introduction to the Psalter that implicitly defines the truth in whose light people are to live their lives even when its affirmations do not work out. It is important that this failure does not lead them to abandon the affirmation.

The Psalter begins, then, by making clear that questions about Yahweh’s faithfulness link with questions about how we live rather than about how we think.

It also begins by presupposing that the key question an individual has to face is anthropodicy rather than theodicy. And amusingly, it assumes not only that theodicy is unnecessary but that anthropodicy is possible. Like the rest of the Tanak, and the Psalter in particular, it takes for granted not only that people must live by the Torah but that they can live by the Torah. Anthropodicy is not a problem. The Torah itself recognizes that one can do something wrong, but it provides for ways then to deal with the issue, but it also assumes that it is not so difficult to choose to serve Yahweh alone, decline to make images, keep Sabbath, avoid murder, adultery, and theft, and so on. The question is whether one wishes to do so. And the psalm provides some incentive.

Psalm 1 confronts theodicy with the question whether one affirms who Yahweh is and lives by his expectations, notwithstanding the fact that his promises concerning what will follow do not always come true.

## The Good Fortune! (2)

The good fortune of all the people who take shelter with him! (Psa 2:12)

In its words about good fortune, Psalm 2 ends with a promise that compares with the one that opens Psalm 1. The body of the psalm is so different from Psalm 1, in form and wording, that one doubts whether the two were composed together, but one can hardly see no significance in their juxtaposition, especially at the opening of the Psalter. Psalm 2 comes closer to giving the impression of raising the theodicy question in its opening words: “Why have nations crowded together, and peoples murmur something empty?” But it subverts the question through its “Why,” which does sound like the theodicy question but is actually something else. It is a rhetorical question that presupposes the pointlessness of the nations’ action, an understanding for which the psalm goes on to provide the justification. After all, the rulers of other nations are taking a stand and making plans against Yahweh and against his anointed! I take the psalm to come from the monarchic period and directly to refer to the Davidic king, but its placement near the head of the Psalter would reflect the Second Temple period and thus refer to an anointed king that Israel does not currently have but expects once more to have one day.

Psalm 2 goes on to refer not to attacks on Israel by other nations but to these nations seeking independence, which in the monarchic period would presuppose the subservience of people such as Moab and Ammon. In origin, then, it presupposes not the reality of threats on monarchic Israel or Judah but the reality of resistance to its sovereignty, and it promises the king Yahweh’s support in forcing them to stay subservient. The psalm does not ask the question “Why does Yahweh allow such resistance?” nor answer it. It rather concerns the question whether the king is going to stay in control of his empire. It presupposes rather than provides the answer to that question and focuses on providing the justification for the answer.

The justification lies in a fact about the past and a consequent fact about the future. The fact about the past is the action Yahweh once took in setting his king on Zion. In a Second Temple context, Israelites might take this reminder to refer to the action Yahweh took in setting up the Davidic monarchy, or take it as an anticipatory reference to action Yahweh is going to take in reestablishing that monarchy. Either way, the fact about the future is that the king is going to exercise forceful authority over nations that seek to assert their independence. “You shall/will smash them.” It might be a bidding, but in the context, it is more likely a promise. When Israelites, and in particular their king, hear such a psalm chanted, the practical answer to the theodicy question commonly lies in facts about the past and facts about the future in whose light they are urged to live in the present.

The psalm’s “good fortune” comment then points to an implication. Modern readers of the psalm might prefer that it took a different stance to the desire of nations for their independence, or at least that it affirmed that Yahweh has a positive purpose for these nations in exercising his sovereignty over them and in giving the king quasi-imperial power over them.[[4]](#footnote-4) Like the Scriptures as a whole, the psalm has no problem with hierarchical thinking. But it does close with the promise of good fortune for “all the people who take shelter with him.” Who are these people? While the promise applies to Israelites, the psalm does not refer to Israelites. Throughout, its “they” and its plural “you” are the nations and their rulers. So the promise surely at least includes them. It follows up the psalm’s related biddings to the rulers: show some insight, accept discipline, serve Yahweh with awe (the meaning of the closing words of 2:11 and the opening words of 2:12 is less clear). If they will do that, they can take shelter with Yahweh. The promise of good fortune and of shelter at least includes them. On their behalf the promise completes a practical answer to the theodicy question. There is no rationale here regarding why nations should be subservient to Yahweh’s anointed. But there is a practical answer to the question of how they would be wise to live their life. It lies in accepting the hierarchy Yahweh prescribes and taking the shelter it offers.

## Appeal

Yahweh, how many are my adversaries! (Psa 3:1 [2])

If one continues to follow the order of the Psalms as the Psalter initially unfolds, then some general and some specific irony attaches to Psalm 3. The general irony is the clash between the promises in Psalms 1 and 2 and the protests that begin in Psalm 3, run through Psalms 3 to 7, and dominate much of the Psalter. Someone who prays Psalm 3 is not finding that good fortune is attending them. They are troubled by the reality that issues in the theodicy question: how does one resolve the clash between the affirmations in Psalms 1 and 2 and the experience that Psalm 3 presupposes? The specific irony emerges from the psalm’s introduction, which associates it with David’s fleeing from Absalom. I assume that this introduction was not original to the psalm, but eventually came to be attached to it.[[5]](#footnote-5) Paradoxically, the introduction does not fit very well the content of the psalm that follows it, any more than it fits the affirmations in the psalms that precede it. Some irony then does attach to the implicit invitation to read the psalm in light of it. In the fashion of irony, however, the tension that the introduction highlights and sharpens between Psalms 1–2 and Psalm 3 is a productive tension. The further specific irony is that Psalm 2 has been concerned with Yahweh’s anointed, and Psalm 3 speaks for someone surrounded by adversaries but shielded by Yahweh and someone whose head Yahweh raises high. While ordinary suppliants will pray the psalm, the reference to David in the introduction plausibly implies that it is most naturally taken as the plea of a king and thus of the person whom Psalm 2 concerns and with whose promises its opening and its body stands in some tension.

The question Psalm 3 directly raises, however, is not a theological or philosophical one but a practical one, perhaps a double practical one. The psalm speaks for someone in physical danger who could understandably be tempted to agree with people who declared that the situation did not seem at all secure (3:1–2 [2–3]). One would suspect that the question attributed to foes externalizes the question arising in the suppliant’s own mind. The response then has several aspects.

First, the psalm begins by addressing Yahweh. This is the nature of a psalm, but it deserves noting because it is the first time the Psalter does so. In Psalm 1 there is no one in particular who speaks and it addresses no one in particular. Psalm 2 likewise addresses no one in particular, though parts of it rhetorically address other nations’ kings, parts of it address Yahweh’s anointed, and Yahweh’s anointed speaks in parts of it. Actually, figures in the Tanak can speak of themselves in the third person, and it may be that Yahweh’s anointed speaks all of Psalm 2. In Psa 3:1–3[2–4], however, there is no doubt that an “I” who is under pressure speaks, and addresses Yahweh

Yet Psa 3:4–6[5–7] then speaks about Yahweh in the third person. Address of Yahweh returns in 3:7[8], and 3:8[9] combines the two. Now given the Tanak’s flexibility about first-, second-, and third-person reference, one might assume that the psalm addresses Yahweh all the way through. But switching between actually addressing God and addressing the congregation is common through the Psalms and in Christian hymnody, and it corresponds to the complex dynamic of worship: people are simultaneously engaged with God and with other people. The switching between persons in Psalm 3 corresponds to a switching of address. At the same time, actually the psalm simultaneously addresses God and congregation throughout, and it is in a sense addressing the self throughout.

I do not imply the assumption that the person who is under pressure composed this psalm. I assume it is likely that a regular psalm composer composed it for use by or on behalf of someone under pressure. But in speaking for the self and speaking to other people as well as to God, the psalm’s dynamic does overlap with the dynamics of theodicy, though it does so in a way that draws attention to a further difference between the Psalms and theodicy. Before and after Gottfried Leibniz introduced the word, in general people who were engaged in discussions of theodicy were not people who were themselves experiencing inexplicable trouble, but people asking questions about the trouble that has come to others. It is still the case. They are seeking to understand the world and reality, or to question the understandings that other people hold. It happened classically in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake, not long after Leibniz’s time. And the people engaged in the discussion are addressing other speakers and writers. In the psalm, it is the troubled person who speaks or writes, or the composer is adopting that person’s position in writing on their behalf. The first-person singular suffix “me/my” alone recurs thirteen times in Psalm 3. It is this “I” who is in trouble who both addresses Yahweh and addresses other people,

The psalm thus fulfils two functions. Addressed to Yahweh, it urges action on his part. The protests and the profession (and to some extent the confession to the community) lead into the appeal for action in 3:7 [8]: “Rise up, Yahweh!” The increased appreciation over the past fifty years in the United States and in Europe for “lament psalms” such as this one has been largely an appreciation for them as an outlet for feelings of wretchedness, worry, and doubt that middle-class Westerners are inclined to keep inside and not to think they may properly express to God. Entitling these psalms “lament psalms” fits this assumption about their significance. Lament is a dominant feature of them, and using them in this way will have been good for the psychic and spiritual health of Westerners. But as a whole, Psalm 3 and other such psalms do not exist simply in order to let it all hang out. Indeed, letting it all hang out surely happens not for its own sake and not even to gain a sense of Yahweh’s sympathy, but to lean on Yahweh to take action with regard to the events that are lamented. Even Psalm 88 wants Yahweh to listen, and surely implies that if he will do that, he will do something. Even if it does not imply that hope, it is addressing God and not just lamenting.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Rastafarian appropriation of Psalm 137 does more than lament the oppression of Caribbean peoples by the Empire. It appeals for the putting down of the Empire.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Addressed to the community, Psalm 3 and other such psalms urge other people to trust in Yahweh in the way that the suppliant does. Perhaps the suppliant would hope that such public confession would add to the motivation for Yahweh to respond. But in the context of reflection on theodicy, it testifies to a persistence of trust whose testimony contrasts with the current reality of which the suppliant speaks, and urges an affirmation of that trust. You, Yahweh, are “a shield about me” and you are “the one who lifts my head high.” No, it doesn’t look that way. But “deliverance belongs to Yahweh.” I exhort you, my brothers and sisters, to maintain that trust. If I can, you can. The psalm makes declarations about Yahweh that contrast with the evidence currently offered by experience. Perhaps the implication is simply that past life and membership of the community has given enough reason for making such affirmations that it is possible to continue making them now. But it is noteworthy that the psalm interweaves qatals with participles and yiqtols. While they might be gnomic qatals declaring the kind of thing Yahweh characteristically does, or anticipatory qatals referring to something so certain that it can be spoken of as already actual, psalms of appeal often include qatals referring to Yahweh’s past action that the psalm looks to see repeated. So here I am inclined to translate, “He has answered me.… I have lain down and slept; woken up.… You have struck all my enemies on the jaw” (3:4, 5, 7 [5, 6, 8]). He has done it before and he will surely do it again.

Centrally, the Psalms maintain conviction about and trust in Yahweh as powerful and good because they live in the present in light of the past and of the future. In the Tanak, faith does not base itself solely on what Yahweh had done in the past, but it does centrally base itself there (as does New Testament faith in continuity with it). Corporately, it assumes that one lives life in the present in light of Yahweh’s acts in the past, especially in the story told in Genesis to Kings and in Chronicles. The Psalms illustrate how there is an equivalent dynamic about the life of individuals—of king and of ordinary people. One trusts Yahweh on the basis of what he has done and of what he is going to do.

## Heeding Testimony

Give testimony to his sacred commemoration (Psa 30:4 [5])

There is no great controversy about the meaning of that colon, but rendering it in English is a different matter. “Give testimony” is יָדָה hiphil, for which the conventional rendering is “praise,” but this translation is more general than the Hebrew word. BDB’s first equivalent is “give thanks,” which matches the verb’s more concrete implications in suggesting praise of someone for something they have done. That corresponds to the meaning of the related noun תּוֺדָה. But it is significant that הוֺדָה can occasionally denote confession of wrongdoing, which is the usual meaning of the hitpael הִתְיָדָה. The action denoted by this verb is a confession or acknowledgment that someone has done something. It is commonly something praiseworthy, but it can be something wrongful. Either way, the confession is implicitly or explicitly a public acknowledgment. And this is of the essence of recognizing something good that a person has done, and specifically recognizing something good that God has done. It denotes giving public testimony to what God has done.

Which links with the noun זֵכֶר, “commemoration,” for which the conventional rendering is “name.” This latter term is also more general than the Hebrew word. BDB does not include “name” among its suggested English equivalents, which are remembrance, memorial, and memory. Those equivalents link with the meaning of the verb זָכַר. That verb’s conventional translation is “remember,” but BDB goes on to render “recall, call to mind,” which puts us on the track of this verb’s common reference to a deliberate act—a more common reference than is the case with English “remember.” Thus זֵכֶר commonly denotes the proclaiming of Yahweh’s name in worship, as people engage in a deliberate recalling of what Yahweh has done. This recalling is a proclaiming of his sacred commemoration or name, a commemoration of what he as God has done.

Whereas many psalms speak for someone in the midst of a crisis, others look back on a crisis and give thanks to God and give testimony to other people for the way he has acted in the context of that crisis. Psalm 30 happens to be the first such psalm in the Psalter. It does so in classic fashion, though it is especially noteworthy because it is one of the psalms that cannot hold back from repeating itself, as if saying something once is not enough. The dynamic of such psalms compares with that of parallelism. Given that the essence of a thanksgiving or testimony psalm is to tell a story, Psalm 30 thus tells its story twice. The elements of the story are:

This is how things were when my life was going well

This is how they went wrong

This is how I prayed

This is how Yahweh responded

This is the praise that is therefore appropriate to him.

The sequence or logic parallels the sequence or logic of a psalm of appeal such as Psalm 3, but the tenses of some of the verbs have changed. In a psalm of appeal, both the good fortune (to use the expression from Psalms 1 and 2) and the experience of things going wrong are past, but the trouble is still present and the appeal is therefore also present. In a testimony psalm, the appeal is past, the response is past, and the trouble is past. (The actual words in Psalm 30 overlap with those in Psalm 6, almost as if Psalm 30 were the testimony psalm to use when Yahweh has answered the appeal in Psalm 6.)

In connection with theodicy, the significance of a testimony such as Psalm 30 lies especially in the last element in the list above. It generates a noteworthy overlap with a psalm of appeal such as Psalm 3, in that both address the other members of the congregation as well as addressing God. They do so with similar implications and with an overlapping though not identical rationale. The first telling of the story in Psalm 30 ends:

Sing for Yahweh, you people who are committed to him,

give testimony to his sacred commemoration.

Because [there is] a moment in his anger,

a life in his acceptance.

In the evening crying may take up lodging,

but with morning, chanting. (30:4–5 [5–6]).

Its second ends with the declaration that the object of Yahweh’s act of deliverance was:

That my heart may make music and not go quiet,

as I give testimony to Yahweh my God for all time. (30:10 [11])

The psalm presupposes that a thanksgiving psalm is not only a thanksgiving psalm but a testimony psalm and that giving thanks to God has little point unless it is out loud and public (something similar applies to an appeal to God, actually). The two versions of the reference to praise that close the psalm’s story make the point in complementary ways.

The first directly urges the congregation to give testimony to what Yahweh has done. This may seem odd, because the psalm concerns not what Yahweh has done for the congregation, but what Yahweh has done for the individual who has had a near-death experience (30:3 [4]). So the congregation is not in a position to give the testimony that the psalm makes. There might be several implications. One is that Yahweh’s acts on behalf of this individual were acts on behalf of the congregation as a whole, if the individual were the people’s leader. Another is that the congregation is expected to view Yahweh’s acts on behalf of an individual (maybe a member of the family) as acts on their behalf, because they identify with this individual. Another is that the congregation is encouraged to make a link between the act that Yahweh has undertaken now for this individual and the acts that he has undertaken on the people’s behalf in the past.

Even more boldly, the second version of the reference to praise declares that the actual object of Yahweh’s act was that its beneficiary should give this testimony. In combination with the first version, this statement suggests that Yahweh acted so that people might have their own conviction about Yahweh’s trustworthiness built up. That conviction depends not only on what Yahweh has done for them but on what he has done for someone else. Testimony builds people up.

The experience of adversity that might raise questions about theodicy, then, finds a response to those questions not only in recollection of what Yahweh has done for the victim in the past (as in a psalm of appeal) but in awareness of what Yahweh has thereby done for other people, one way or another. In the present, a victim of adversity might not appreciate a beneficiary of deliverance coming along and telling their story, any more than it is wise to tell such a victim to read the story of Job. The psalm does not presuppose that dynamic, but rather points towards the idea that one who experiences Yahweh’s act of deliverance gives public testimony to what Yahweh has done, so that the conviction of the congregation as a whole may be built up against the day when they do have experience of adversity (as they are wise to read Job in the good times so as to recall it in the bad times).

## Expectation

Weak people, they will enter into possession of the country,

and will delight in abundance of well-being. (Psa 37:11)

Psalms 37 and 137 are the two psalms of which Western readers most disapprove, and both relate to theodicy. Psalm 137 is a strong version of an appeal psalm like Psalm 3, more explicit in its insistence that Yahweh should take action against abusive or imperial nations. Given that Western readers typically belong to abusive or imperial nations, it is quite proper for us to be worried by Psalm 137. The line in Psalm 37 about powerless people (עֲנָוִִים) entering into possession (יָרַשׁ) of the country (אֶרֶץ) carries similar implications. Entering into possession of the country was what Israel did back at the beginning. The phrase recurs in Deuteronomy and Joshua. One can imagine the psalm being prayed against other nations by the same people as prayed Psalm 137, but also being prayed in the monarchic period or the Second Temple period by people subjected by fellow-Israelites to the kind of socio-economic pressure that prophets such as Isaiah rebuke. So once again it is wise of modern Western readers to disapprove of the psalm, because we may be not only members of abusive or imperial nations, but also members of nations that take up more than their fair share of the world’s resources, and members of classes within those nations that take up more than their fair share of their own nations’ resources.

Further irony then attaches to the fact that our disapproval of the psalm sits uncomfortably alongside Jesus’s repeating its words.

οἱ πραεῖς … κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν. (Matt 5:5)

The identity of the πραεῖς, like that of the עֲנָוִִים, is subject to debate (and most New Testament translations interestingly render γῆν “earth” rather than “country” or “land”), but in our present context the striking fact is that Matthew’s version of Jesus’s words is (except for the addition of the definite article) identical with the words of the Septuagint’s version of the psalm.

The line that especially offends modern readers is:

Whereas I have been young, I have also become old,

but I have not seen a right-living, faithful person [צַדִּיק] abandoned,

or their offspring asking for food. (Psa 37:25)

Which has been known to prompt the response, “You must have had your eyes shut.”

The rest of the psalm (not to say the rest of the Psalter) suggests that one cannot take this testimony too literally. Its hyperbole relates to its concern for the way its readers respond in attitude to the issues that stimulate questions about theodicy. Like Psalm 1, it is not really a psalm, in the sense that it never addresses Yahweh in praise or in prayer. It addresses people who acknowledge Yahweh, with exhortations about their spirituality, in the manner of Proverbs and of Proverbs’ theology and spirituality. It is especially interested in two attitudes, a vice and a virtue.

It opens:

Don’t get vexed at bad people. (Psa 37:1)

This exhortation fits as ill in the Psalter as the claim never to have seen faithful people in need, in that the Psalter is full of vexation. Psalm 37 says that vexation gets you nowhere, or rather only gets you into trouble. Amusingly the prominence of anger in the Psalms is another cause of offense to modern readers, and this opening bidding to forsake anger might make Psalm 37 one of our favourites were it not for the unrealistic claims about the experience of faithful people that the psalm makes later. Instead of vexation, the psalm advocates trust in the form of hope and expectation. Both the negative and the positive exhortations are based on who Yahweh is, and on the certainty that he will take action against wrongdoers and on behalf of the weak. The testimony regarding what the teacher has (not) seen is part of the backing for that trust, hope, and expectation. It is indeed hyperbole. The Psalms and Proverbs are full of hyperbole. Hyperbole exaggerates something that is true. Confronted by the realities that generate the theodicy question, the challenge of Psalm 37 to the powerful is to take action on behalf of the weak against the abusers (they had better get their own abuse under control, too). But for the powerless, its challenge is to keep trusting and hoping rather than fretting, on the basis that there is evidence of God’s caring for the powerless.

The stance the psalm commends compares and contrasts with that in Daniel 10–12. I take these chapters to be the last scene in the Tanak, and it is neatly appropriate that this last scene should uniquely promise a new kind of life for some people who had been faithful to Yahweh but had lost their lives because of it. Daniel 12 then represents what one might call an eschatological solution to the problem of theodicy. It is the solution to which Christians may appeal in light of Jesus’s resurrection, with its implications for people who identify with him, though the New Testament does not articulate the main significance of Jesus’s resurrection in this way.

The Psalms have nothing explicit to say about a new life after death, though there are passages that can be read with this reference by readers who have already come to think in those terms. In themselves, the Psalms speak of hope to be realized in this life. The hope of which they speak is a hope relating to the life of the people who pray them, whereas the resurrection of which Daniel 12 speaks benefits only the martyrs who have already died. It does not directly benefit their friends and family, or the visionary and the visionary’s community. Compared with Daniel 12, the hope of the Psalms is fuzzy and imprecise. Yet in another sense it is quite clear and precise because it is a hope in God, and its understanding of God is clear and precise. It doesn’t know how God will implement the hope it expresses, but it knows he will. If it is aware of something like the theodicy question, it does not imply an answer in terms of theology, only of spirituality

Psalms 49 and 73 are commonly read as raising the theodicy question and as answering it with an affirmation concerning an afterlife. Psalm 49 speaks of being surrounded by persecutors who look as if they mistakenly think that their wealth can rescue them from death. It declares that in reality Sheol will be their permanent home, whereas

God will redeem my life from the hand of Sheol,

because he will take me. (Psa 49:15 [16])

In a modern context, its offering the solution to a puzzle (a חִידָה; 49:4 [5]) might indeed sound like an undertaking to set forth an answer to the theodicy question, but in the context of the Tanak its promise is more like that in Psalm 37 (like Psalm 37, it addresses other people rather than God). Wayward people will not live out their lives; God will rescue faithful people. If there are exceptions, I am going to ignore that because I know that God is trustworthy. “Why should I be afraid” is its actual question and “Don’t be afraid” is its conclusion (49:5, 16 [6, 17]).

Something similar is true of Psalm 73.[[8]](#footnote-8) Here the problem is envy rather than fear (73:3), and an awareness that faithfulness isn’t paying (73:13–14), but the solution is the same. The psalmist thought long and hard about the matter, in the manner of a scholar thinking about theodicy, but got nowhere (73:16). Appropriately, the acknowledgment of this fact is obscurely formulated. The description of how a solution came, “I went into God’s sanctuary” (73:17) is also allusive, but the solution itself is the same as the one in those other psalms. On one hand, “I considered their end” (73:17). God will see that the triumph of the faithful is short-lived. The contrasting destiny of the faithful is again allusively articulated. Translations have “I am continually with you,” but it is a verbless clause, and the parallel colon, like the previous one, has a qatal verb, so one might translate:

I have been continually with you,

you have held onto my right hand. (73:23)

This psalm again interweaves address of God with address of the community. Whether it makes an affirmation about the past or the present, it also goes on to express convictions about God and the future:

By your purpose you will lead me,

and after, take me to honour (73:24).

Someone who knows about resurrection might interpret this as a conviction about resurrection, but the Tanak does not encourage such an understanding, and other such expressions of confidence in God’s deliverance refer to deliverance in this life.

Therefore I realized I had to give up being stupid (73:22). The psalm hardly implies that one should not think about the theodicy question but it does imply that one should not get sidetracked from living in light of the facts about God that one knows and even more from the reality of living with God in the now.

Nearness to God is good for me (73:28)

Or it has been good for me or it will be good for me.

## Acknowledgment

If it is right to think in terms of the Job story coming to a climax, then the climax arrives with Yahweh’s address in Job 38–41. With similar irony to one we have noted in some psalms, Yahweh’s revelatory address is perplexing, but it is clearly enough an affirmation of Yahweh’s sovereignty in the world, an affirmation that somehow responds to Job’s questions and to which Job is challenged to give his submission. The Job story comes closer to being “about” theodicy than the Psalms generally do, but its “solution” to the problem is again a practical one. It does not think it can “solve” the “problem.” It concerns how we live with the toughness that can characterize human experience when we do not have a solution.

Its emphasis on recognizing who Yahweh is then resonates with the Psalms, and one may hypothesize that an aspect of the significance of the Psalms’ focus on Yahweh’s person and acts lies in this emphasis being a resource to people when they find life tough. More or less randomly:

God is for us refuge and strength,

a fully available help in troubles.

Therefore we will not be afraid when earth changes,

or when mountains collapse into the middle of the seas.…

Yahweh Armies is with us,

Jacob’s God is a turret for us. (Psa 46:1, 7[2, 8])

When Jerusalem is under pressure, it is a good idea to ask why, because there may be facts about the city that it needs to face. That is Job’s friends point to Job. But the Psalms say little about the waywardness of city, people, or individual, as the story of Job says little about Job’s. They talk much about the affliction of city, people, and individual, and much about the greatness and commitment of Yahweh. They emphasize the greatness and commitment of Yahweh against the background of the way life can be tough, both when it actually is tough (as in the protest psalms) and when it is fine (as it seems to be in Psalm 46, and many others). The implication is that the community affirms the character of Yahweh when things are fine, building up its trust against the times when things are tough, as well as being prepared to affirm the character of Yahweh when things are tough. There is no implication that in either context one might not ask the theodicy question, but there is an implication that one would be unwise to get too preoccupied by it, because of the point that comes out most clearly in Job, that the Scriptures do not have an answer to it, and the question of how we live with the tough experiences is therefore worth some focus.

Interpretation operates in two directions. We come to understanding something on the basis of questions in our mind and a framework for thinking about these questions, as the people we are in our culture, and if we are lucky, our questions and framework both open up the object of our interpretation to us and also provide is with at least partial answers to our questions. But the object of our interpretation has agenda and a framework of its own and has questions it addresses to people who seek to understand it. Usually, there is overlap but not identity between our questions and framework, and the agenda and framework of the object of our interpretation. We can then ignore the other’s agenda and framework if we wish and simply profit from ways in which the object of our interpretation responds to our questions. Or we can pay heed to its agenda and framework as well as to its answer to our questions, and thereby have our perspective broadened. Specifically, then, the theodicy question provides us with a way into the Psalms and into other works within the Tanak, but the Psalms’ own agenda and framework lie somewhere else. When we bring our concerns, insights, and questions to the Psalms or to other parts of the Tanak (messianism, atonement, peace, history, feminism, colonialism, trauma, theodicy…), we may well find that we discover things in the texts that we had not seen before, we may acquire illuminating insights, and we may gain support for our convictions. But unless we are prepared for a merging of horizons in terms of our agenda and framework and the text’s agenda and framework, we will stay confined within our starting horizon.[[9]](#footnote-9)

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1. See, e.g., Matthias Grebe, and Johannes Grössi (ed.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Suffering and the Problem of Evil*. (London: T&T Clark, 2023); Antti Laato and Johannes C. de Moor (ed.). *Theodicy in the World of the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On Psalms 1 and 2 as an entryway to the Psalms, see, e.g., Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper and Row 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This verse and others through this study raise exegetical questions on which scholarly conclusions vary: my views are in John Goldingay, *Psalms* (3 volumes; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006, 2007, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See David J. A. Clines, “Psalm 2 and the MLF (Moabite Liberation Front),” in M. Daniel Carroll R., David J. A. Clines, and Philip R. Davies (ed.), *The Bible in Human Society: Essays in Honour of John Rogerson*, JSOTSup 200 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 158–85. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My approach to the psalm introductions is influenced by Brevard S. Childs, “Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16 (1971): 137–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On Psalm 88, see recently Carleen Mandolfo, “Psalm 88 and the Holocaust: Lament in Search of a Divine Response,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007): 151–70. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, “Tuning Hebrew Psalms to Reggae Rhythms: Rastas Revolutionary Lamentations for Social Change,” *Crosscurrents* 50 (2000—2001): 525–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On which see recently Leslie J. Francis, Susan H. Jones, and Christopher F. Ross. “Is God Really Good to the Upright? Theological Educators Exploring Psalm 73 through the Jungian Lenses of Sensing, Intuition, Feeling and Thinking,” *HTS Hervormde Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76/1 (2020); Joel K. Biwul, “The Lamentations of the Disadvantaged: Reading Psalm 73 in the Context of Oppression in Contemporary Nigerian Society,” *Old Testament Essays* 35 (2022): 410–32. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For this image, see (e.g.) Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)