

# Reflections on *Singing the Ethos of God*<sup>1</sup>

Gordon J. Wenham

## ABSTRACT

The article begins by summarising and evaluating Brock's analysis of the five main approaches to biblical ethics. It concurs with Brock's preference for the communitarian, biblical ethical, and exegetical approaches. But whereas Brock would give preeminent place to the exegetical/meditative approach of Bonhoeffer, this article argues that the communitarian approach should be supreme. Interpretation of the Bible's teaching on ethics should not reflect the whims of individual scholars but reflect the consensus interpretation of the universal Church. This may sometimes be difficult to recover, but it should be the goal. The rest of the article is devoted to arguing that the Psalms have been much more important in the formation of Christian and Jewish ethics than is usually realised. Books on biblical ethics tend to overlook the contribution of the Psalter, although it is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New, and the most used part of the Old Testament in the Church.

Two aspects of the Psalms have made them especially influential in determining ethical thought. First they have been set to music and sung, and what is sung is easily memorised and dwells in the consciousness in a

\* \* \* \*

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Artikel beginnt mit der Zusammenfassung und Bewertung von Brocks Analyse der fünf Hauptansätze zur biblischen Ethik. Er pflichtet Brocks Vorliebe für die gemeinschaftsorientierten, biblisch-ethischen und exegetischen Ansätze bei. Während Brock jedoch dem exegetisch-meditativen Ansatz Bonhoeffers den Vorrang einräumt, argumentiert dieser Artikel, dass diese Rolle dem gemeinschaftlichen Ansatz zukommen sollte. Die Interpretation der ethischen Lehren der Bibel sollte nicht die Launen einzelner Gelehrter widerspiegeln, sondern den interpretativen Konsens der universalen Kirche. Dieser mag manchmal schwer zu erheben sein, dennoch sollte dies das Ziel sein. Der Rest des Artikels widmet sich der These, dass die Psalmen in der Gestaltung der christlichen und jüdischen Ethik viel wichtiger waren als üblicherweise erkannt wird. Bücher zur biblischen Ethik tendieren oft dazu, den Beitrag des Psalters zu übersehen, obwohl er das meistzitierte alttestamentliche Buch

way that tuneless prose or poetry does not. Second, they have been prayed and this makes their sentiments peculiarly powerful. Reader-response theory has analysed the ethics of the Psalms and pointed out how those who pray the Psalms are made to identify with the psalmist's viewpoint. This is done by naming their prestigious author David, by the use of the first person so that persons praying make the words their own, and by portraying the righteous positively and the wicked negatively. The use of the Psalms as prayers may also be analysed by speech-act theory. Praying the Psalms in public worship is akin to taking an oath in court: the words are addressed to God in the presence of human witnesses. In this way worshippers commit themselves to the words and attitudes of the Psalms in a strong way. Whereas merely listening to laws, proverbs or stories involves a passive engagement with their teaching, no one else will know if one silently decides to ignore an ethical principle, praying a Psalm actively involves making promises to God who knows whether or not the worshipper is sincere. It is because the Psalms have been central to Christian worship down the centuries that their influence on theology and ethics has been so profound.

\* \* \* \*

im Neuen Testament ist und der in der Kirche am meisten verwendete Teil des Alten Testaments.

Zwei Aspekte der Psalmen waren besonders einflussreich in der Bestimmung ethischen Denkens. Zunächst wurden sie vertont und gesungen, und was gesungen wird, wird leicht auswendig gelernt und lebt auf eine Weise im Bewusstsein, wie es Prosa oder Poesie ohne Melodie nicht können. Zweitens wurden die Psalmen gebetet, und die Gesinnung der Psalmen bekommt durch diese Tatsache eine besondere Kraft. Die Rezeptionsästhetik hat die Ethik der Psalmen untersucht und darauf hingewiesen, wie diejenigen, die die Psalmen beten, angeleitet werden, sich mit der Sichtweise des Psalmisten zu identifizieren. Das geschieht durch die Nennung ihres renommierten Autors David, durch den Gebrauch der ersten Person, so dass die betende Person sich die Worte zueigen macht, und dadurch, dass die Gerechten positiv und die Bösen negativ dargestellt werden. Der Gebrauch der Psalmen als Gebete kann auch von der Sprechakttheorie her untersucht werden. Im öffentlichen Gottesdienst

die Psalmen zu beten ist dem Schwur vor Gericht ähnlich: die Worte richten sich vor menschlichen Zeugen an Gott. Auf diese Weise binden sich die Beter recht stark an die Worte und Haltungen der Psalmen. Während das bloße Anhören von Gesetzen, Weisheitssprüchen oder Storys eine passive Beschäftigung mit ihren Lehren involviert, wobei niemand weiß, ob jemand stillschweigend

\* \* \* \* \*

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article propose un résumé et une évaluation de l'analyse faite par Brock des cinq manières principales d'aborder l'éthique biblique. Il affirme avec Brock sa préférence pour les approches communautaire, exégétique et celle de l'éthique biblique. Mais, tandis que Brock privilégie l'approche exégétique et méditative de Bonhoeffer, Wenham pense que l'on devrait plutôt privilégier l'approche communautaire. L'interprétation de l'enseignement biblique éthique ne devrait pas refléter les préférences de chaque spécialiste, mais le consensus interprétatif de l'Église universelle. Cela peut s'avérer parfois difficile à réaliser, mais ce devrait être le but. Le reste de l'article montre que les Psaumes ont joué un rôle bien plus important qu'on ne le pense souvent dans la

\* \* \* \* \*

It is a pleasure to respond to Brian Brock's *Singing the Ethos of God*. Seldom have I awaited the publication of a book with such anticipation. It is a fine work and most stimulating in its ideas, most of which I wholeheartedly endorse, but inevitably an ethicist focuses on different issues from a biblical exegete. This difference in perspective will, I hope, prove mutually enriching. I was asked to reflect on the first section of the book which is an illuminating survey of the main contemporary approaches to biblical ethics. I will not repeat Simon Woodman's overview of these approaches, but simply give my own reactions to Brock's summaries of different views and suggest where his ideas could be further developed. Then I shall review three different approaches to the Psalms in particular that suggest that at least historically, if not today, the Psalms have been even more important in the formation of Christian ethical attitudes than Brock argues.

Assessment of Part 1

The Introduction begins with a short sketch of Augustine's conversion to the reading of Scripture. His initial distaste for Scripture was prompted by his moral estrangement from its norms, Augustine having accepted the mores of his contemporaries.

entscheidet, ein ethisches Prinzip zu ignorieren, beinhaltet das aktive Beten eines Psalms, Gott Dinge zu versprechen, und Gott weiß, ob der Beter ehrlich ist oder nicht. Weil die Psalmen über die Jahrhunderte im christlichen Gottesdienst so zentral waren, war ihr Einfluss auf die Theologie und Ethik so tiefgreifend.

\* \* \* \* \*

formation de l'éthique juive et chrétienne. Les ouvrages consacrés à l'éthique biblique tendent à ignorer la contribution du psautier, alors que c'est là le livre de l'Ancien Testament le plus souvent cité dans le Nouveau et le plus fréquemment utilisé dans l'Église.

Deux facteurs ont contribué à l'influence des Psaumes dans la détermination de la pensée éthique. D'une part, ils ont été mis en musique et chantés, et les paroles des chants sont facilement mémorisées et imprègnent la pensée d'une manière qui ne se retrouve pas pour des textes qu'on ne chante pas. D'autre part, ils ont été priés et les sentiments qu'ils expriment ont ainsi puissamment affecté ceux qui les ont priés. C'est parce que les Psaumes ont été au centre du culte chrétien au cours des siècles qu'ils ont exercé une si profonde influence sur la théologie et l'éthique.

\* \* \* \* \*

To start with he questioned Scripture, but later he allowed it to question him. In Scripture he heard God's voice calling to him and shattering his deafness. As he prayed the Psalms, a genuine love for God was kindled in his heart. Though Brock states that he does not regard Augustine's account of the relationship between ethics and Scripture as normative,<sup>2</sup> he believes modern students have much to learn from him. 'He is aware that one must be morally transformed to read Scripture, and that we learn to read the Bible in communities of tradition.'<sup>3</sup> The first third of Brock's work offers an overview of how far different approaches have taken on board these ancient insights.

The first chapter, 'Reading Self-Consciously: the Hermeneutical Solution', reviews the approaches of Schüssler Fiorenza, Patte and Cosgrove. Brock thinks all three are inadequate, but for different reasons. Though Brock does not agree with Schüssler Fiorenza's claim that the Bible is oppressive, he agrees with her that interpretation involves commitment, whether this interpretation supports the biblical writer's views or criticises them, and applauds her concern for the poor and the weak. On the other hand, he argues that Patte and Cosgrove's claim to neutrality and their attempt to referee objectively between different views is

misguided. They fail to recognise fully their own prejudice and how it distorts their own judgment. They base themselves on Enlightenment canons of objectivity, which minimise the involvement of God in human affairs, and thus they miss his voice speaking through Scripture. This seems to me a fair assessment of these positions.

The authors discussed in the second chapter entitled 'Reading Together: the Communitarian Solution' claim that the Church is the community in which the Bible is properly interpreted and which should embody the ethic of Scripture, pre-eminently manifested in the life and teaching of Jesus. 'The Christ story orders Christians' lives as they tell their own stories through the lens of that story.<sup>4</sup>

Brock is more sympathetic to this communitarian approach than to the hermeneutical, in particular its acknowledgement that God speaks through Scripture and that the Church should acknowledge his voice. He also approves of their emphasis on an ethic which moulds every thought and action, not just big and problematic decisions. But two things about the communitarian approach make him very uneasy. First, their insistence that it is within the Church that the ethic is created and learned leads, he thinks, to an anthropocentric approach to the Bible and its interpretation. Where there are differences of view, how do we judge who is being led by the Spirit? Brock's second concern is the over-emphasis of this approach on narratives and the downplaying of explicitly ethical texts found in the law, wisdom and Psalms.

I sympathise with Brock's concerns, but I would not share his objections on principle. From the church fathers to Calvin and some of his modern adherents, it has been recognised that the Bible belongs to the Church, and that the Church must interpret it, not outsiders. The problem has not been the principle of the Church being the authoritative interpreter of Scripture, but that often it has refused to listen to Scripture, or as Schüssler Fiorenza has pointed out, that it has used Scripture to oppress. Then of course there is the problem of schism, so that every ecclesiastical body claims it has the right to interpret Scripture its own way, with a multitude of conflicting interpretations then being advocated. Ideally, as Calvin argued,<sup>5</sup> Scripture needs to be interpreted by bishops of the universal Church who subject themselves to its authority. So I favour the communitarian approach in principle, though I fear, from Brock's summary, that some of their views would not command uni-

versal consent in the world-wide Church.

As far as his second concern about the over-reliance on narrative for ethics, he may have a point as far as New Testament studies are concerned, but in Old Testament studies of Old Testament ethics the neglect of narrative has been conspicuous. The standard German introduction to OT ethics by Otto<sup>6</sup> has very little. John Goldingay cautions against using the narratives for ethics in *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*: 'When we take stories as examples of what we should do or be, we risk turning the faith into something we do rather than something God has done.'<sup>7</sup> Similarly the popular book *How to Read the Bible for all Its Worth* discourages its readers from drawing moral points from biblical stories.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as St Paul says, from their first composition biblical stories have been told in order to make ethical points: 'For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Rom. 15:4, ESV).

It has been standard Christian and Jewish practice ever since to read the OT narratives for their ethical instruction. It is a modern aberration to neglect it. Not, of course, that it is always easy to pick up the author's intention in telling these stories. For example, very often people suppose that OT accounts of war are glorifying it, whereas the perspective of the writers is that violence is so abhorrent to God that, to eliminate it, he was prepared to destroy all mankind save Noah and his family (Gen. 6:11, 13). It is essential that *description* of behaviour is not confused with *prescription*: often the biblical writers intend us to be horrified by what they describe; they do not want us to imitate it. And in this regard the law and wisdom books do help us to see where the narrators are coming from and what their assumptions are.<sup>9</sup> So once again I find myself in basic sympathy with the communitarians, though, like Brock, cautious about some of their conclusions.

The third chapter 'Focusing Reading: the Biblical Ethics Solution' discusses what is the most familiar, synthesising, approach to deriving ethical teaching from the Bible. For example, Frank Matera's *New Testament Ethics: the Legacies of Jesus and Paul* takes each Pauline epistle and each gospel separately, seeking to define its particular ethical teaching first, before integrating it into a broader synthesis. Matera insists that one must begin with the canonical books as they stand, not for example trying to distinguish between the historical Jesus

(or Paul) and the Jesus of Matthew. ‘The *primary* object of New Testament ethics should be the writings of the New Testament rather than a historical reconstruction of the ethical teachings of Jesus, the early church, Paul, and so on.’<sup>10</sup> While not disagreeing with Matera’s starting point, Brock argues that describing the teaching of different biblical books is only a start in formulating a biblical ethic. The contributions of the different books do need to be combined and then compared with the modern situation to determine their relevance and application to the modern Christian.

By contrast, Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* goes much further in this direction. Again it is focused on the New Testament, whose teaching he surveys on a number of topics. However, Hays insists that one should not just look at the explicit ethical injunctions of the New Testament, but on the images it uses to describe the Christian life and the narratives, especially of the life of Christ, to produce a rounded Christian ethic. He sums this up under three headings: community, cross and new creation. The Church is called to be a countercultural community. Jesus’ death is the paradigm for human action. The Church must demonstrate resurrection life in the as-yet-unredeemed world. In studying the teaching of the New Testament the exegete will note parallels and analogies with modern situations and by the guidance of the Spirit will be able to apply them to today’s issues. Hays illustrates his method by looking at a variety of problems, such as violence, divorce and homosexuality.

Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* skips much of the preliminary descriptive work that Matera and Hays do and goes straight to the relevant biblical texts, and then tries to explain them. For example he sees the New Testament *Haustafeln*, which advocate reciprocal responsibilities between husband and wife, master and slave, child and parent, as exemplifying behaviour inspired by Christ. These injunctions contrast with the Stoic lists where only the adult male was the free agent and other ranks in society had to obey his rules. Brock warms to this approach, especially when it is combined with insights from the communitarian one. He gently chides Hays and Yoder for not drawing out the implications of mutual submission in response to politically correct egalitarians.<sup>11</sup> More serious is his charge of Marcionism. ‘These analyses disproportionately favor the New Testament, with the implication that Christians, in their actual use of the Bible, should look for moral guidance to the New

Testament, which, in Marcionite fashion, they treat *de facto* as more important and accessible to Christian ethical enquiry.’<sup>12</sup>

These seem to me fair comments. Hays himself says: ‘the New Testament vision trumps the Old.’<sup>13</sup> I would add that when New Testament scholars do ethics and compare its teaching with that of the Old, they tend to focus on the Law and Wisdom and perhaps the Prophets, but neglect the contribution of the narratives and Psalms, probably the parts of the Old Testament most quoted and alluded to in the New. They often fail to realise that the provisions in the law often do not represent the behaviour that the biblical writers would regard as ideal, only the minimum social requirements.<sup>14</sup>

Brock would like to see the Biblical Ethics approach supplemented by insights from the Communitarian. I think I would argue the reverse. It seems to me that the insights of the Communitarians are more basic than the Biblical Ethics school of thought. The Biblical Ethics school of thought, at least as expounded by Brock, seems to leave the determination of interpretation to individual experts, who probably disagree, rather than seeing theologians as members of the body of Christ, the Church, whom they serve and to whom they must answer.

Chapter 4, ‘Reading Doctrinally: the Biblical Theology Solution’ focuses on the work of Brock’s colleagues in Aberdeen, Francis Watson and John Webster, both of whom stand in the stream of biblical theology that goes back to Barth. This follows a brief discussion of Brevard Childs, who developed canonical criticism.<sup>15</sup> I was a little surprised at how little attention was given to canonical criticism in Brock’s discussion of the Psalms,<sup>16</sup> for it has been the main area of discussion in Psalm studies in the last two decades. Ever since Childs’ disciple G. H. Wilson wrote *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (1985) there have been many articles and monographs and two major commentaries<sup>17</sup> exploiting this method. Canonical criticism of the Psalms focuses on the structure of the Psalter, the sequence of Psalms, their titles, the arrangement of the Psalms into books, and so on, with a view to determining how the Psalms were understood when they were collected into the current anthology. This gives a much more focused approach to their understanding than did the older methods such as form criticism. It aims to elucidate what the Psalms meant to those who first read them canonically. Opinions differ as to the success of this approach and there are differences between canonical critics on certain

issues of interpretation,<sup>18</sup> but intrinsically canonical criticism seems to me the method that takes the texts as Scripture most seriously.<sup>19</sup>

Brock finds merit in the positions of Watson and Webster. He praises Watson for actually discussing biblical texts and applying them to current issues. His work *Agape, Eros, Gender* brings together biblical criticism, Christian dogmatics and cultural sensitivity.<sup>20</sup> However Brock hints that he thinks Watson is more sensitive to culture than a Christian theologian ought to be: 'Watson is happier to admit that the Spirit speaks to the church through the world than he is with prophetic speech within the church itself.'<sup>21</sup>

Brock seems happier with Webster's theory of exegesis, but he laments that Webster does not put his programme into action. He sums up the programme in three points: first, the subject of all Scripture is Christ; second, the reader of Scripture must be ready to repent when Scripture convicts him of error; third, readers must discover their place in the scriptural narrative. Reflecting on contemporary hermeneutics Webster claims that they often miss the mark because they fail to submit to God's demands mediated through Scripture. It is by listening to the word that a Christian conscience is formed, not through developing more and more hermeneutical rules. 'In conscience I attend to the call of myself as perfected in Christ, who both reveals my distance from perfection and urges and guides the closing of that gap.'<sup>22</sup>

After a very broad endorsement of Webster's programme, Brock offers this justified criticism: 'In arriving at the conclusion that theology is exegesis, Webster leaves undone what he asks his readers to do. Having said that theologians should not make exegesis a secondary or tertiary part of theology, he nevertheless takes as his primary texts the writings of Barth and Bonhoeffer on theological hermeneutics.'<sup>23</sup>

The final chapter of Part 1, 'Reading as Meditation: The Exegetical Theology Solution', is devoted to expounding the approach of Bonhoeffer, both to the Psalms and to ethics. Brock gives more space to Bonhoeffer's ideas than to those of anyone else save Augustine and Luther. One wonders if he feels that Bonhoeffer's approach fulfils Webster's programme of exegesis. Bonhoeffer's key idea is that the Psalms are meant for meditation, as Psalm 1 puts it: 'On his law he meditates day and night.' Meditation (*hagah* in Hebrew) is not silent thought, so much as speaking it aloud either to oneself or with others. Like Luther, Bonhoeffer

sees the Psalter as providing us with appropriate words to address God. It is designed to train our speech and affections towards God.<sup>24</sup> This meditation is focused on the law, which Bonhoeffer finds not only in the Pentateuch, but throughout Scripture.

While the Bible does contain principles and rules, meditation on the law is not really a question of formulating these rules and applying them, so much as involvement in a conversation with God so that the meditator is moulded and guided to live in a godly way. It involves living with an undivided heart and seeing all that we receive as a gift from God,<sup>25</sup> allowing our outlook and behaviour to be changed by them. It is above all prayer: only prayer enables us to let go of sin and follow God's way. For Bonhoeffer the Christian life is not based on rules or principles, but on intimacy with God mediated by obedience to the guidance found in the Bible. Ethics is a journey on a path on which God guides us, not by giving a long-range map, but by telling us what the next step is.

Brock basically concurs with Bonhoeffer's approach, though he thinks he gave too little scope for the work of the Spirit, and emphasised creation at the expense of redemption. But he agrees with Bonhoeffer that producing rules from the Bible is a mistake. 'Bonhoeffer has substantiated our worries that summaries of the Bible's ethical content are methodologically problematic. Such summaries turn Scripture into a book that contains moral claims rather than being the point at which meditation on God's Word can become even richer.'<sup>26</sup>

Like Brock I appreciate Bonhoeffer's method of meditation on Scripture as a way to find God's guidance, but it seems to me to run the risk of becoming very subjective unless it is controlled by the communitarian and biblical ethics approaches. Individualism can run riot, and all sorts of outrageous ideas may be claimed to be justified on the basis of meditation on the Scriptures. Nor am I persuaded that principles and rules, models and virtues, cannot be derived from Scripture. What is wrong with affirming that the Bible rules out adultery and murder, but insists on honouring parents, keeping the Sabbath, and caring for the poor? Admittedly there are many grey areas and tricky situations where it is not clear how one should act on the basis of Scripture, and what might be the right course of action for one person might not be right for another. But that does not mean there are no clear, firm principles that must characterise Christian life and behaviour.

## The influence of the Psalter over three millennia

This then is what Brock has to say in part I of his book. Much of the rest of the book is taken up with expounding Augustine and Luther's use of the Psalms. That two of the greatest theologians in the Western church should pay such attention to the Psalter is of course significant, but the influence of the Psalms is much more pervasive than this. It was among both Jews and Christians the most widely used part of the Old Testament, as the evidence from both Qumran and the New Testament shows.

The Psalms were a regular part of Christian worship both in monasteries and in public worship for nearly two millennia, until hymns and worship songs displaced them in some branches of Protestantism. In the Middle Ages a Psalter was the only part of the Bible a layman was likely to own. Set to music people would sing the Psalms at home and at work as described in Athanasius' letter to Marcellinus. This wide diffusion of the Psalms gave them a profound and wide influence in forming the Christian ethic. But the very nature of the Psalms makes it likely that their influence went deeper than other forms of ethical instruction in the Church. I want to mention three facets of their power.<sup>27</sup>

### Singing and the Psalms

First they have most often been sung. The saying 'Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes its laws', is often ascribed to Plato, but actually comes from Andrew Fletcher, a leading Scottish politician at the opening of the seventeenth century. Whoever said it matters little, for it expresses very well the power of songs.

In his Letter to Marcellinus Athanasius wrote:

Words of this kind should be not merely said, but rendered with melody and song; for there are actually some simple folk among us who... think the reason for singing them is just to make them more pleasing to the ear! This is by no means so; Holy Scripture is not designed to tickle the aesthetic palate, and it is rather for the soul's own profit that the Psalms are sung. This is so chiefly for two reasons. In the first place, it is fitting that the sacred writings should praise God in poetry as well prose, because the freer, less restricted form of verse, in which the Psalms... are cast, ensures that by them men should express their love to God with all the

strength and power they possess. And secondly, the reason lies in the unifying effect which chanting the Psalms has upon the singer. For to sing the Psalms demands such concentration of a man's whole being on them that, in doing it, his usual disharmony of mind and corresponding bodily confusion is resolved, just as the notes of several flutes are brought by harmony to one effect.<sup>28</sup>

Jews have also commented on the value of music in intensifying devotion. Judah he-Hasid, a twelfth-century rabbi wrote:

Say your prayer in the melody that is most pleasant and sweet in your eyes. Then you shall pray with proper concentration; because the melody will draw your heart after the words that come from your mouth. Supplication in a melody makes the heart weep, and praise in a melody makes the heart happy. Thus you will be filled with love and joy for Him that sees your heart, and you will bless Him with great love and with joy.<sup>29</sup>

Martin Luther in 1538 wrote:

Music is to be praised as second only to the Word of God because by her are all the emotions swayed. Nothing on earth is more mighty to make the sad gay and the gay sad, to hearten the downcast, mellow the overweening, temper the exuberant, or mollify the vengeful... That is why there are so many songs and psalms. This precious gift has been bestowed on men alone to remind them that they are created to praise and magnify the Lord.<sup>30</sup>

More recently David Ford has commented:

What does (singing) do with the crucial Christian medium of words? It does with them what praise aims to do with the whole of reality: it takes them up into a transformed, heightened expression, yet without at all taking away their ordinary meaning. Language itself is transcended and its delights and power are intensified, and at the same time those who join in are bound together more strongly. So singing is a model of the way praise can take up ordinary life and transpose it to a higher level without losing what is good in other levels. The social power of music in general (for good or ill) is well known, and it moves at levels and in ways that nothing else can.<sup>31</sup>

Thus set to music and sung communally the Psalms have even more power than when they are

merely recited. But even mere recitation is a more powerful instructor than listening to stories, commands or wisdom sayings. Listening is passive, indeed the message can be ignored by the listener, but recitation and especially singing is an activity which involves the whole person and cannot be honestly undertaken without real commitment to what is being said or sung.

Singing or reciting the Psalms is a form of prayer, and this has important ethical consequences. For example, when we pray 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us', we are committing ourselves to forgive other people. What worshippers say in prayer ought to have a profound effect on them, because these words are addressed to God, who can evaluate their sincerity and worthiness. If we praise a certain type of behaviour in our prayers, we are telling God that this is how we intend to behave. On the other hand, if in prayer we denounce certain acts and pray for God to punish them, we are in effect inviting God to judge us if we do the same. This makes the ethics of liturgy uniquely powerful. It makes a stronger claim on the believer than law, wisdom or story, which are simply subject to passive reception: one can listen to a proverb or a story and then take it or leave it, but if you pray ethically, you commit yourself to a path of action.

### Reader-response theory and the Psalms

Reader-response theory has been partially explored by Dorothea Erbele-Küster in her book *Lesen als Akt des Betens: Eine Rezeptionsästhetik der Psalmen*<sup>32</sup> in which she uses reader-response theory to illuminate the rhetorical situation of praying the Psalms. She asks: how does the person praying the Psalms become involved and experience their significance?

She starts her discussion by endorsing the insights of canonical critics who have seen the sequencing of the Psalms as significant. Psalm 2 proclaims the triumph of the Davidic house, but this is immediately followed by a collection of Psalms each headed 'by David', many of which relate the trials that dogged his life. Like most canonical critics she does not assume that the titles are historically reliable, but they do constrain the uncritical reader to value them, because they represent the words and experience of Israel's greatest king. Thus Erbele-Küster thinks these Davidic titles give the Psalms a paradigmatic quality and encourage the later reader to identify with their sentiments.<sup>33</sup>

Erbele-Küster draws attention to other devices in the text that clearly aim to influence the reader's perspective. There are general blessings pronounced: 'Blessed is the man who / blessed are all who / blessed is the one who' (1:1; 2:12; 84:12). The paradigmatic quality of the lifestyle that is pronounced blessed invites the reader to identify with it. The prospect of blessing should encourage all to adopt this way of life.

Another device inviting the worshipper to identify with the sentiments of the Psalm is the use of the first person. The psalmist often speaks in the first person 'I will bless the LORD at all times' (34:1). Someone singing or praying this Psalm later is thus invited to do the same. Indeed the suggestion may well be reformulated as a command to share in the psalmist's experience. Psalm 34 continues: 'Oh taste and see that the LORD is good' (34:8). There then follows a blessing in the third person on anyone who puts his trust in God: 'Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!' (34:8) The Psalm concludes with the general lessons that the psalmist has learned which he wishes future generations to appropriate for themselves:

Come, O children, listen to me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

What man is there who desires life, and loves many days, that he may see good?

Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.

Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.....

Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivers him out of them all. (34:11-14, 19)

This switch between first and third person encourages the user of the Psalm to identify with the viewpoint of the psalmist.<sup>34</sup> But particularly the use of the first person encourages such identification: 'The experience of the I of the psalm embodies a religious ideal, whose reality is open to the reader to experience.'<sup>35</sup>

### Speech-act theory and the Psalms

Another approach that sheds light on the uniqueness of the Psalmic ethic draws on the insights of speech-act theory. Speech-act theory was developed in the late twentieth century by philosophers of language such as Austin and Searle, and then applied to theology by various scholars such as Evans and Thiselton. Unfortunately there have

been no major attempts to use speech-act theory to illuminate the ethics of the Psalms but it seems to me to offer great potential.

I have already observed that the Psalms differ from other parts of the Bible in that they are meant to be recited or sung as prayers. That is, they are public address to God. The Psalms put powerful words into the worshipper's mouth:

For there is no truth in their mouth;  
 their inmost self is destruction;  
 their throat is an open grave;  
 they flatter with their tongue.  
 Make them bear their guilt, O God;  
 let them fall by their own counsels;  
 because of the abundance of their transgressions  
 cast them out,  
 for they have rebelled against you (5:9-10).

Here the psalmist is accusing the wicked and summoning God to intervene against them. We have a similar scenario in Psalm 52. This involvement of the worshipper in expressing assent to these sentiments makes the Psalms quite different from the other modes of teaching ethics in the OT. The OT narratives were presumably recited by storytellers within the family or in the tribes, but they rarely make explicit their judgments on the actions that are recited, so the moral of the story might have been missed and certainly did not have to be endorsed by the listeners. They could have just ignored the point, as I suspect many listening to worthy sermons often do.

The same is true of the laws. We are not sure how they were passed on in Bible times. Few people would have had written copies of the law: some texts suggest the Levites were involved in teaching the law. In the light of the practice in neighbouring cultures, it would seem likely that most people's knowledge, if any, would have come from hearing recitations of the laws at religious festivals. But once again for the listener the reception of the law was essentially passive. You listened to the law and maybe an explanation of it by a preacher, and then it was up to you to keep it or reject it as you saw fit (Neh. 8:1-10). As long as you did not publicly reject or break the law you would survive, socially at least. Thus receiving the ethical teaching of the law or the history books of the OT was basically a silent passive affair.

Reciting the Psalms is different. The prayer of the Psalms is taking these words on his lips and saying them to God in a personal and solemn way. An example is Psalm 7:8-9:

The Lord judges the peoples;  
 judge me, O Lord, according to my  
 righteousness  
 and according to the integrity that is in me.  
 Oh, let the evil of the wicked come to an end,  
 and may you establish the righteous –  
 you who test the minds and hearts,  
 O righteous God!

The psalmist affirms that God will judge all the peoples but then invites God to judge him, despite affirming that God tests the minds and hearts. It is a quite challenging and disturbing prayer: do all worshippers really want God to test their innermost motives? But time and again in the Psalms we meet this sort of prayer. The reciter or singer of the Psalms is thus involved in giving very active assent to the standards of life implied in the Psalms.

The closest analogy in Scripture to this affirmation of standards, I think, is found in Deuteronomy 27. There in a ceremony to be performed shortly after entry into the promised land. All the tribes stand before the Levites who then pronounce curses on certain types of, mostly secret, sins. After each curse 'all the people shall answer and say, "Amen".'

But even saying 'Amen' to a curse seems to me semi-passive when compared with reciting the Psalm. When you pray a Psalm, you are describing the actions you will take and what you will avoid. It is more like taking an oath or making a vow.

Austin pointed out that many remarks are much more than statements about facts, which are either true or false. Promises for example change the situation and impose obligations on the speaker and create expectations in the listener. A promise is an example of a speech act. Wedding vows are speech acts too. The key words in a marriage ceremony are spoken publicly and to God. 'I A take you B to my wedded wife to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.' One trusts that brides and bridegrooms pronounce these words after careful thought beforehand and with complete sincerity on the big day. The words themselves transform their status: they become man and wife. Thus the words are performative.<sup>36</sup> They change the situation.

One of the earliest writers to apply speech-act theory to the language of worship was Donald Evans in *The Logic of Self-Involvement*.<sup>37</sup> He does not specifically discuss the language of the Psalms,



but his more general observations are most pertinent to our discussion. He argues that most theological statements from a believer have a stronger or weaker commissive sense. This observation, I believe, aptly describes the situation of those praying the Psalms. It is particularly pertinent to a study of the ethics of the Psalms. Evans begins by noting that when God addresses humankind he makes a commitment, and when a person addresses God there is a commitment in response:

Similarly man does not (or does not merely) assert certain facts about God; he addresses God in the activity of worship, committing himself to God and expressing his attitude to God. In so far as God's self-revelation is a self-involving verbal activity ('His Word is claim and promise, gift and demand') and man's religious language is also a self-involving verbal activity ('obedient, thankful confession and prayer'), theology needs an outline of the various ways in which language is self-involving.<sup>38</sup>

Evans' book attempts to provide such an analysis of how the language of worship involves the worshipper. Evans says that statements like 'I promise' are commissive performatives, for the speaker *commits* himself in more than a verbal way. They have a 'content', for the speaker is undertaking to behave in a specified way in the future; for example, he is undertaking to 'return this book tomorrow'.<sup>39</sup>

God's promises are also commissives, e.g., Psalm 2:7-8:

I will tell of the decree:  
The Lord said to me, 'You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you.  
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your  
heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession'.

These divine commitments evoke a response from humans. In fact, in many of the Psalms divine promises are quoted by the psalmists in their prayer and praise. Following Austin's terminology, Evans calls sentiments such as 'I thank you', 'we praise thee, O Lord', 'I apologize', behabitives, because

they related the speaker to another person in the context of human *behaviour* and social relations, without being strongly commissive. The speaker implies that he has certain attitudes in relation to the person whom he addresses, or towards what he is talking about. In saying, 'I thank you', I imply (but do not report) that I am grateful to you; in saying, 'I apologize for

my behaviour', I imply (but do not report), that I have an unfavourable attitude towards my behaviour. Behabitives imply attitudes.<sup>40</sup>

Evans argues that most language about God is either commissive or behabitive and therefore self-involving. Self-involvement is particularly evident in first-person utterances. 'Where I report my attitude in the present tense, my utterance is rarely a mere report, equivalent to *your* report of my attitude. It tends to *commit* me to the pattern of behaviour to which I am referring; it has a forward reference to behaviour for which I am the responsible agent, not merely an observer.'<sup>41</sup>

Many Psalms illustrate this:

Blessed be the Lord,  
for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love  
to me  
when I was in a besieged city.  
I had said in my alarm,  
'I am cut off from your sight.'  
But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy  
when I cried to you for help (Ps. 31:21-22).

Many remarks which on first sight seem to be mere statements of fact, constatives, within the context of worship have clearly performative force. According to the Old Testament, 'man in general is created with a role as nature's steward and God's articulate worshipper. In the biblical context, to say, "God is my Creator" is to acknowledge the *role* which God has assigned'.<sup>42</sup> To say 'I acknowledge you as my king' or 'You are my king' is to express a strong commitment.<sup>43</sup> The so-called enthronement Psalms (93-100) offer many examples of this.

The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty;  
the Lord is robed; he has put on strength as his  
belt. (Ps. 93:1)

These 'Commissives are utterances in which the speaker commits himself to future patterns of more-than-merely-verbal behaviour.'<sup>44</sup>

Praying the Psalms is a performative, typically a commissive, act: saying these solemn words to God alters one's relationship in a way that mere listening does not. This is not a new insight: St. Paul saw confession of faith as altering one's status before God: 'if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.' (Rom. 10:9-10)

Paul's argument may be applied to the Psalms.

Throughout the Psalter one is confessing that the LORD is God, and as the Psalms often insist this is supposed to be a confession that comes from a pure and sincere heart. And it is certainly salvation that the Psalmist seeks: time and again he pleads to God to save him, to deliver him, to hear his prayer and so on. Whether this always occurs or not is not my purpose to discuss now. I simply want to draw out some of the similarities between taking an oath, making a vow, confessing faith and praying the Psalms. I think these parallels may help us to see how powerful the commitment is that the Psalms make of their user.

Professor Gordon J. Wenham teaches Old Testament at Trinity College, Bristol. He is author of many books, including *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (T & T Clark, 2000). From 2005-2008 he was a member of the KLICE Advisory Council.

### Notes

- 1 This is an edited version of a paper presented at the Annual Book Colloquium of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE), Tyndale House, Cambridge, 3-4 September 2008.
- 2 Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) xi.
- 3 Brock, *Singing*, xi.
- 4 Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1989), 105 quoted in Brock, *Singing*, 22.
- 5 E.g. *Institutes* IV. 9:13.
- 6 Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994) 273-275, which contains just 13 references to the historical books (Joshua – Chronicles) as opposed to over 100 to Deuteronomy alone.
- 7 *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 57.
- 8 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (London: Scripture Union, 1983) 77-78.
- 9 For further discussion see Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the OT Ethically* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).
- 10 Frank Matera, *New Testament Ethics: the Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 7 quoted in Brock, *Singing*, 37.
- 11 Brock, *Singing*, 47-49.
- 12 Brock, *Singing*, 50.
- 13 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 336.
- 14 See Gordon J. Wenham, 'The Gap between Law and Ethics in the Bible', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 48 (1997) 17-29.
- 15 This involves studying the final form of the biblical books alongside their critically reconstructed history. As Childs has not given an account of biblical ethics using canonical criticism, Brock wonders whether it is actually possible.
- 16 There are glimpses of the method in Brock, *Singing*, 310, 316.
- 17 F. L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger, *Psalmen 51 – 100* (2000) and J. L. Vesco, *Le psautier de David* (2006).
- 18 E.g. on the messianic expectations of the Psalter.
- 19 For a basic introduction to this approach see J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of the Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).
- 20 Brock, *Singing*, 59.
- 21 *Singing*, 62.
- 22 *Singing*, 66.
- 23 *Singing*, 68.
- 24 *Singing*, 73.
- 25 *Singing*, 79.
- 26 *Singing*, 95.
- 27 These ideas are more fully developed in my forthcoming book, *Songs as Torah*.
- 28 Athanasius Schaefer, *Spiritual Texts: The Letter of Athanasius...to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms* (<http://www.athanasius.com/psalms/aleterm.hum> based on Robert C. Gregg, *Athanasius: the Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (London: SPCK, 1980) 123-124.
- 29 Quoted by Abraham E. Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), 29.
- 30 Quoted by Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor, 1955) 268-269.
- 31 David F. Ford and Daniel W. Hardy, *Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2005) 19.
- 32 *WMANT* 87; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001.
- 33 Erbele-Küster, *Lesen*, 68, 109.
- 34 *Lesen*, 112.
- 35 *Lesen*, 112.
- 36 Paul Ramsey, 'Liturgy and Ethics', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7.2 (1979) 139-171 argued that many liturgical remarks are performative, see 145-146.
- 37 Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (London: SCM, 1963).
- 38 Evans, *Logic*, 14.
- 39 *Logic*, 32.
- 40 *Logic*, 34-35.
- 41 *Logic*, 119.
- 42 *Logic*, 155.
- 43 *Logic*, 52-53.
- 44 *Logic*, 57.