

The High Praises of God as a Two-Mouthed Sword: Psalm 149 in Canonical Context¹

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Abstract

In the *Book of Common Prayer* Psalm 149 is set (on the basis of the KJV in vv. 1, 9) for use on All Saints Day. To the extent that the Word of God heard in the Bible calls for a non-violent engagement with violence and evil, Psalm 149:6 can stick as a bone in the throat, with its apparent picture (exemplified in Cromwell and his troops on the field before the Battle of Naseby) of *concomitant* actions, on the part of the “saints of God,” of “high praises” in their throats and a “two-edged” (literally, “two-mouthed”) sword in their hand. This article proposes that a proper reading of this verse discloses it to be (in the spirit of Psalm 8:1–2 KJV/NRSV) a radical subversion of just such an understanding and practice. I proceed by a close line-by-line reading of the psalm accompanied by canonical and extra-canonical contextualizations of various motifs. The result is to disclose a psalm that becomes a “sharp sword” (Isa 49:2; cf. Heb 4:12–13) in the mouth of those who would be servants of God.

I begin with two pre-suppositions: First, it is now increasingly recognized that the Shape of the Psalter is itself a proper object of study; that the compilation of the Psalter in its final form is not simply an aggregative affair, but a result of further theological reflection in the way the component psalms, and component sub-groups of psalms, are ordered in relation to each other.² This means that a full study of any given psalm includes its placement within the Psalter, and a consider-

1 This essay was originally presented at the Canadian-American Theological Association Annual Meeting, as part of the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences, held at Ryerson University, Toronto, ON, May 28, 2017.

2 On intertextuality, compare T. S. Eliot in his essay, “Tradition and the Individual talent.” He writes, “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations,

ation of how its components not only serve that placement but also interact with resonating components throughout the Psalter.³

Second, I take the Psalter, by its very title, *tēhillīm*, “Praises,” to gather up all the essential themes of the rest of the Bible and cast them in the mode of praise.⁴ Given, then, the placement of Ps 149 as the Psalter’s penultimate psalm, and given its call to “sing a New Song,” it is properly read in intertextual relation to the Bible as a whole, but especially in relation to that part of the Bible, and that locus in the Biblical story, in which the “New Song” seems to have its origin. That part is Deutero-Isaiah, and that locus is Israel’s exile, where the prophet-poet, after introducing God’s Servant in Isa 42:1–8 and distinguishing between the “former things” and “new things” (42:9), calls out (42:10), “Sing to the LORD a New Song, / his praise [*tēhillāh*] from the end of the earth.”

Psalm 150 brings the Psalms’ long, tortuous path to a fascinating conclusion in that it picks up one the Psalter’s formal elements, the “call to praise,” but this time provides no rationale for the praise. That is, it contains no trace of the standard “for” clause as introducing the grounds and content of the praise, no “for he [does or is this or that]” (compare, e.g., Pss 95:3, 7; 96:4, 5; 100:5; 149:4⁵). It as though all possible rationales have already been canvassed in Pss 1–149 and need not be re-stated. Psalm 150 simply calls on “all breath” to praise: *hallēlū-yāh*. But there is a tension between the “all breath” of Ps 150 and the thematics of Ps 149. For in Ps 149 we are still at the impasse to which we were introduced at the Psalter’s beginning, where Ps 1 presents the righteous as initially alone and beleaguered by the wicked, only to end up in the congregation of the righteous, while the wicked “will not stand in the judgment [*mišpāṭ*], / for the way of the wicked will perish.” In Ps 2, God’s “Son,” appointed heir of “the ends of the earth,” is surrounded by hostile nations and their kings. These figures are warned: come to terms with God’s royal Son, lest they “perish in the way.” These two opening psalms, functioning as an introduction to the Psalter, engage the same generic conflictual situation from two different perspectives, *tôrāh* in Ps 1 and *māšīāh* in Ps 2. In so do-

proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new” (italics original). Accessible online at: <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>

3 David M. Howard models this form of Psalms study in his monograph, *The Structure of Psalms 93–100* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997). For the bearing of his analysis on the construal of Ps 100:3, see my essay, “‘And Not We Ourselves’: Psalm 100:3 and the Eschatological Reign of God,” in J. Gerald Janzen, *When Prayer Takes Place: Forays into a Biblical World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 99–133. In my analysis, Ps 149 takes up the eschatological thematics of Psalms 93–100, including the ‘New Song’ motif, and raises them to a new level.

4 See James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1994), especially ch. 7.

5 Where chapter and verse numbering differ between Hebrew, Greek, and English Bibles, I shall cite only the English numbering, as scholars will know how to find their way to the Hebrew and Greek numbering.

ing, these psalms initiate the problematic that Ps 150 celebrates as finally resolved. If, then, Ps 149 paves the way for the praise of God by “all breath” in Ps 150—by resolving the conflictual situation that informs Psalms 1 and 2 and runs all through the Psalter, and in this resolution giving the rationale for the final “call to praise”—the question arises: *How* does Ps 149 resolve the conflict so as to leave only praise from “all breath”?

The answer lies in v. 6: “The high praises of God in their throats and two-mouthed swords in their hands, / to wreak vengeance on the nations . . . to execute on them the judgment [*mišpāṭ*] written!” There it is. It would seem that with the high praises of God in our throats and the sword in our hand we see to it that God’s enemies “perish in the way,” so that all that is left to breathe will, by golly, praise the LORD. Those who are old enough to remember World War II will recall hearing, in 1942, a “new song” belted out over the radio, “Praise the LORD, and pass the ammunition / And we’ll all stay free.”

I confess that when we sing Ps 149 each year on All Saints Day, v. 6 sticks in my throat like a bone. It doesn’t jibe with the character of the redemptive role of the Servant of the LORD as *imago dei* in Deutero-Isaiah.⁶ For this Servant is announced in Isa 42 as one who will “bring forth” God’s *mišpāṭ* to the nations. And that *mišpāṭ* is equated with God’s “*tôrāh*,” “law,” or “teaching,” and in this role the Servant will be “a light to the nations,” to “open blind eyes,” and “bring from the prison those who sit in darkness.” And when, according to Isa 53, the *mišpāṭ* or “just cause” of this Servant is *subverted*, the Servant’s *vengeance* on the transgressors is to *intercede* for them. It is *this* figure, in *such* a role, who is the “arm of the LORD” as *revealed* in Isa 53—not a sword-wielding arm, but an arm raised in intercession. If, then, Ps 149 issues a call to “sing a New Song” as echoing the founding call to that new song in Isa 42, then v. 6 seems to go against the grain of the Servant as God’s *imago dei*.

Unless we have been mis-reading the conjunction, “and” (Hebrew *vav*) in Ps 149:6b. One of the functions of this all-purpose conjunction, in Biblical Hebrew, is what grammarians call a *vav explicationis*, where what comes after this conjunction *explicates* what went before, or further *characterizes* it. In the case of Ps 149:6b I note that, in Hebrew, the phrase, “two-edged” (*pîpîôt*) means, literally, “two-mouthed” (from the singular noun, *peh*, “mouth”). And if we take the conjunction as explicating the previous line, then we have a deliciously subversive

6 This paper, though conceived and developed on its own terms, stands in organic relation to two previous papers: “On the Moral Nature of God’s Power: Yahweh and the Sea in Job and Deutero-Isaiah,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56/3 (1994), 458–478; and “*Ecce Homo*: The Servant of YHWH as *Imago Dei* in Deutero-Isaiah,” *Canadian Theological Review* 2/2 (2013), 1–14. The first paper focuses on how the Servant’s embodiment of God’s *mišpāṭ* is grounded in God’s own *mišpāṭ* as manifest in non-violent creation of the world; while the second paper explores the way in which the Servant is presented as God’s true *imago* vis-à-vis the idols of the Nations.

interplay between the two verse-halves: the “high praises in the *throat*” as a “two-mouthed sword in the hand.”⁷ In this way, Ps 149:6 subverts the kings and nations in a manner similar to the subversion exercised by the Servant of Isa 53. Their wisdom and their power are based on the literal sword and the violent force by which their rule is enforced. And this wisdom, this power, is enshrined in their creation stories, where the creator God founds creation through acts of war against rebellious heavenly forces. But in Israel’s mature creation accounts (Gen 1 and Deutero-Isaiah), God creates not by violent force, but through the generative power of the divine Word. Just so, when Ps 149 celebrates its “Maker” and King” (v. 2), implicitly, the psalm celebrates God as “making” and “ruling” through a divine *mišpāṭ* that we see running through Deutero-Isaiah and grounded there in God’s creation of the cosmos (Isa 40:14).⁸

But how plausible is my figurative construal of “a two-mouthed sword in the hand” as consisting in “the high praises of God in the throat”? Consider the following figurative usages of the imagery of military arms: (1) Hos 6:5: “I have hewn them by the prophets / I have slain them by the words of my mouth, / and my judgment [*mišpāṭ*] goes forth as the light.” (2) Isa 11:4: “With righteousness shall he judge [*šāpāṭ*] the poor, / and decide [*hōkīāḥ*] with equity for the meek [*‘ānāwīm*]; / he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, / and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.” The result of this action by this Davidic “shoot” and “branch” is an Eden-like *šālôm*, in which even age-old enemies within the natural world come to live at peace with one another. Thematically, the vision is of a piece with Isa 2:4, which begins, “He shall judge [*šāpāṭ*] between the nations, / and shall decide [*hōkīāḥ*] for many peoples,” and ends with a conversion of military arms into agricultural tools. (3) Ps 8: Humankind, as *imago dei*, is commissioned to dominion in the earth. What does the psalm say about how to “still” the “enemy and the avenger” [*mitnaqqēm*]? “*Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings*, you have founded a bulwark, to still the enemy and the avenger (v. 2).” Consider, finally, these texts in Deutero-Isaiah concerning the *Servant* as *imago dei*. (4) Isa 49:2: “He made my mouth like a sharp sword; . . . / he made me a polished arrow; / I give you as a light to the nations, / that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (5) Isa 53:1: Kings and nations, amazed, exclaim, “To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” These last texts follow Isa 42:1–

7 For another, thematically contrasting, correlation of the words “throat” and “mouth” in reference to human utterance, compare Ps 9:5: “For there is no truth in their mouth; / their inmost self is destruction; / their throat is an open grave; / they flatter with their tongue” (ESV).

8 For the theme of God as “Maker” in Deutero-Isaiah, see Isa 45:9, 11; 54:5; and especially 51:13, where Israel, in calling on God to act in *warlike* fashion in creation-redemption, is chided for “forgetting” the LORD its Maker and the Maker of the cosmos. In the Psalms, see, e.g., Pss 95:6; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 136:4, 5, 7; 146:6; and especially 115:15, where the LORD is contrasted to the idols of the nations (115:4–8).

4, where the servant is called to “bring forth justice” (*mišpāṭ*) and “law” (*tôrāh* | “teaching”) to the nations. It is almost as though Deutero-Isaiah reaches back to the figure in Hos 6:5 and elaborates upon it vis-à-vis the development of the portrait of the God’s Servant-*imago*. I take all these usages to support my construal of “a two-mouthed sword in the hand” as figurative of the “high praises in the throat.”

With this, I return to Ps149, and focus on the three purpose-clauses with which the psalm ends. In singing to the Lord this New Song after the manner of Isa 42:10, and specifically in letting the “high praises of God in their throat” be as a “two-mouthed sword in their hand,” the addressees in this psalm—precisely in this subversive way—are

⁷to [*lē-*] do [*‘āsôt*] vengeance [*něqāmāh*] on [*bě-*] the nations [*gōyyim*], chastisement [*tikēhôt*] on [*bě-*] the peoples [*lē’ummim*],

⁸to [*lē-*] bind their kings with [*bě-*] chains
and their nobles with [*bě-*] fetters of iron,

⁹to [*lē-*] do [*‘āsôt*] on them the judgment [*mišpāṭ*] written!

I draw attention to the progression: *vengeance* > *chastisement* > *judgment*. In a political context the first noun, Hebrew *něqāmāh*, connotes the re-assertion of an *imperium* over rebellious vassal states. It is not simply an act of “getting even,” as the word might connote in inter-personal contexts. Rather, it connotes the restoration of proper order. The general scenario is identical to the one in Ps 2:1–3. How is that vengeance, that *imperium*, re-asserted? By the power of a literal sword? Or, on analogy with the Servant’s intercession, by (so to speak) “killing them with kindness”? The psalm spells out the nature of this “vengeance” by the two words that follow: *chastisement* and *judgment*.

The word, “chastisement” (Hebrew *tikēhôt*), is the noun cognate of the verb, *hōkiāh* that I have noted as parallel to the verb *šāpaṭ* (“judge”) in Isa 2:4 and 11:4. Verb and noun occur often in *wisdom* contexts, with connotations of a chastening or punishing that has as its end correction and the inculcation of wisdom rather than condign condemnation. When the word occurs in political contexts, such as we see in Isa 2 and 11, it carries the same connotation. John Goldingay puts the connotations of the two nouns in Ps 149:7 aptly when he translates the verse, “To execute redress among the nations, / rebukes among the countries,” and comments,

Here it seems that Yhwh takes redress, though to translate *něqāmāh* as vengeance gives a misleading impression (see on 94:1). Indeed,

9 *bal’ummim* for MT *bal’ummim*, as commonly recognized.

the function of the redress is to rebuke them It is to put them in their place, to chastise them for their attitudes and to get them to see the truth about their position in the world and before Yhwh.¹⁰

To be sure, the second purpose clause speaks of binding kings in irons and nobles in iron fetters. But the language again may well be figurative, a form of non-violent “restraint” analogous to the “bulwark” in Ps 8 that is “founded” in the mouths of “infants” and “sucklings.” The purpose of that “bulwark” is indicated in the Hebrew phrase, *lēḥašbît*, involving the preposition *le-* (as in Ps 149:8, 9), where the infinitive *ḥašbît* expresses a *causative* nuance in the basic verb *šābat*. Given that the base meaning of the latter verb is “to cease, stop,” this would mean that the function of the “bulwark” thrown up from “the mouths of infants and sucklings” is simply to render the aggression of the enemy ineffectual or bring it to a standstill. The “binding in chains” of Ps 149:8 would serve the same general function. Goldingay, interestingly, makes this comment on v 8: “The . . . account of the way this redress and rebuke will be administered continues to follow the promises of Isa. 40–55. Those chapters speak of kings being put in their place, of people coming to Israel in shackles (Isa. 45:14).”¹¹

What, now, of the term in the third purpose clause, “To do on them the *mišpāṭ* written”? What does “written” refer to? A judicial *ad hoc* decision handed down as a “last judgment” on those doomed to perish, before those who remain and still breathe are then, in Ps 150, called on to praise God? Or, does the word refer to something written down previous to this eschatological action; some text or texts that this action *accords* with? Citing the *Midrash on the Psalms* (2:385), Goldingay notes various voices proposing the *tôrāh*, or specific texts in Deuteronomy, or the prophets, or even the Psalms. For himself, Goldingay writes that “Yhwh has made a decision (cf. 146:7; 147:19–20) concerning these nations and their leaders; it is the negative side to the decision spoken of in Isa. 42:1–4.”¹² I believe that the direction in which he points is squarely on target. In order to show this, I must back up a bit to consider how the matter of *writing down texts for future reference* functions in the Isaianic tradition.

Excursus: Isaianic Wisdom vis-à-vis That of the Royal Court

In this excursus I want to draw on the work of Joseph Jensen and a comment of

10 John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 3: Psalms 90–150* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 741–42. His reference to Ps 94:1 is significant insofar as that psalm forms part of the little sub-collection spanning Psalms 93 through 100 a sub-collection marked by repeated references to the eschatological “new song” (Pss. 96: 1; 98:1). Again, in Psalm 94, the issue is one of *wisdom* over against *folly* (v. 8), the former distinguishing Yahweh as “judge of all the earth” (v. 2, 15) as manifest in *chastening* (v. 10, 12).

11 Ibid., 741–42.

12 Ibid., 743.

Martin Buber to sketch a background for the construal of the “*mišpāṭ* written” in Ps 149:8 as a reference to the *mišpāṭ* // *tôrāh* of Isa 42:1–4. In a nutshell, Jensen argues¹³ that the verb, *hôrāh*, “direct, teach, instruct,” and its cognate noun, *tôrāh*, “direction, teaching, instruction, law,” in Isaiah carry a primarily *wisdom* connotation, as countering the conventional wisdom informing political theology and practice throughout the royal courts of the ancient Near East. This word, in verb or noun forms, occurs in a variety of contexts, most graphically perhaps in Isa 28, where the prophet asks, “Whom will he teach [*yôreh*] knowledge, / and to whom will he explain the message [*šēmû ‘āh*, “what is heard”]? / Those who are weaned from the milk, / those taken from the breast?” (vv. 9–10). Given the “deafness” of King, court, and people, God will have to address them through the events of their history, as one would teach a newly-weaned child, where it will be “precept upon precept [*šāw lě-šāw*], precept upon precept [*ditto*], line upon line [*qāw lě-qāw*], line upon line [*ditto*], here a little, there a little.” (v. 10). The Hebrew terms here, by the way they stand for the alphabetical letters *šādhe* and *qoph*, and at the same time echoing the verb *šāwāh* (“to command”) and the noun *qāw* (“measuring-line”) (as, ominously, in 28:17), drive home the intimate nexus between Isaiah’s prophetic word and God’s activity in history as instruction in divine wisdom. It is as though God’s word is inscribed in two alphabets: in the proclaimed and then written-down oracles of the prophets, and, for those who have not been taught to read, God’s word as spelled in the events of history.

In Isa 30 we see Isaiah uttering a divine oracle concerning current attempts of the Judean monarch to enter into a treaty with Egypt “without asking for my counsel” (v. 2), but instead relying on the conventional political wisdom represented by the court’s stable of counselors and sages. The oracle itself is then to be written down, as God’s says to Isaiah, “And now, go, write it before them on a tablet, /and inscribe it in a book, / that it may be for the time to come / as a witness for ever. / For they are a rebellious people, lying sons, / sons who will not hear the instruction [*tôrāh*] of the LORD” (vv. 8–9). Following a dire warning of events to ensue upon such rebellion, Isaiah then ends this particular oracular “teaching” on this note: “Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious [*hānan*] to you; / therefore he exalts himself to show mercy [*rahēm*] to you. / For the LORD is a God of justice [*mišpāṭ*]; blessed are all those who wait for him” (v. 18). What is striking in this last verse is not only the palpable echo of Exod 33:19 and 34:6, but the way in which the word *mišpāṭ* is here infused with the connotations of those two words of grace and mercy. When it is considered that the prophetic *tôrāh* (“instruction” or “teaching”) earlier in the chapter moves through a penultimate emphasis on disciplinary chastening through the events of history to an ultimate emphasis on

13 Joseph Jensen, *The Use of tôrā by Isaiah: His Debate with the Wisdom Tradition* (CBQM 3; Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1973).

a divine *mišpāṭ*—understood in terms of grace and mercy—we have here the development of a *nexus of meaning* between *tôrāh* and *mišpāṭ* as the heart of Isaiah’s message. And this *tôrāh-mišpāṭ* nexus of meaning lies over against the so-called wisdom of the royal court and its counselors with their knowledge of conventional state-craft.

But the call to write oracles down comes already in Isa 8, where the prophet says, “Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching [*tôrāh*] among my disciples [*limmudîm*]. I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from Jacob” (vv. 16–17). This binding/sealing is so that, at a later time, this “teaching” and “testimony” may be consulted (v. 20). Now, in Isa 50, the Servant of the LORD says, “The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught [*limmudîm*],¹⁴ / that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary. / Morning by morning he wakens, / he wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught [*limmudîm*]” (v. 4). I follow Martin Buber¹⁵ in taking the Servant’s self-description as one of the *limmudîm*, as that Servant’s self-identification with the *limmudîm* referred to in Isa 8. The implication is of a prophetic tradition transmitted down through a prophetic circle founded by Isaiah, and perhaps continuing to speak to their own respective times as informed by the *tôrāh*-wisdom at the core of Isaiah’s original message. In that case, the Servant in chapter 50, who goes on to say, “The LORD God has opened my ear, / and I was not rebellious” (v. 5) stands in contrast to those exilic contemporaries, within Israel and in surrounding nations and peoples, who cling to conventional notions of divine *mišpāṭ*. Over against them this *limmud*, this “disciple,” practices a *mišpāṭ* of non-violent witness to God’s *mišpāṭ-tôrāh* as announced in Isa. 42:1–4, and as grounded in the divine creative actions referred to in Isa. 40:12–14. But if this Servant-figure, as one of the *limmudîm*, has his ear “opened” through reading in the “*tôrāh*-testimony” of Isaiah, may we assume that the exilic message of Deutero-Isaiah is itself written down? So that, for example, it becomes the written platform for the further oracular activity now to be found in Isa 56–66? And may we not implausibly wonder if, analogously, the reference to the eschatological “New Song” in 42:10, together with all the subsequent references in Deutero-Isaiah to singing, may have spawned (or informed) a psalmistic tradition that now appears in the eschatological hymns of praise in the Psalter—not least of all in those psalms calling to “sing to the LORD a New Song”? And in such psalmistic contexts, might we not assume that references to the divine *mišpāṭ* and to God’s activity in judging (the verb *šāpaṭ*) would carry the connotations that this word has in Deutero-Isaiah?

14 NRSV translates the phrase here with “the tongue of a teacher.” I assume because the translator(s) forgot that in the ancient world one *reads aloud*, and that one learns while reading aloud. In such reading, one does not hear one’s own tongue but the tongue in the word itself. The result is that the tongue, thus practiced, can then speak the word that has been learned.

15 Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 202–205.

Parentetical note: One signature-mark of Deutero-Isaiah is the repeated contrast between “Former Things” and “Latter Things,” or between “The Old” and “The New.” The contrast is perhaps drawn most sharply in 43:18–19a: “Remember not the former things, / nor consider the things of old. / Behold, I am doing a new thing; / now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” This generic contrast is given concreteness in juxtaposing how God acted in the Exodus (43:16–17) with how God will now act (43:19b–21), where, not incidentally, the new action ends on the note, “that they might declare my praise.” The praise, presumably, will take the form of the New Song. In that case, what was the Old Song? Presumably it celebrated the Exodus deliverance referred to in 43:16–17. Now, in that Old Song, in Exod 15:1–18, God is celebrated quintessentially as “a man of war” (*ʾiš milḥāmāh*) (v. 3). In the Deutero-Isaianic call to “sing to the LORD a new song” in Isa 42:10 we shortly encounter this very title for God. Following the exclamation to “Let them give glory to the LORD, / and declare his praise in the coastlands” (42:12), the praise announces,

The LORD goes forth like a mighty man,
like a man of war [*ʾiš milḥāmāh*] he stirs up his fury;
he cries out, he shouts aloud,
he shows himself mighty against his foes.

It would appear that the New Song, like the Old Song, continues to celebrate God as a Divine Warrior. But the lines that follow—not in the third person, as descriptive of how one might perceive the LORD “from the outside,” but in the first person, as voicing God’s own “inner warfare”—suggest a subversion of the old portrait to place it on a different footing:

For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in travail [*ka-yôlēdāh*],
I will gasp and pant.

The point here is twofold. First, the very shapes of the two verses underscores how the second is modeled on the first, with the crucial contrast coming in the simile-phrases: “like a man-of-war/like a woman in travail.” Secondly, the phrase, “like a woman in travail” carries a connotation of the otherwise “hidden underside” of warfare. In almost every other occurrence of this phrase (nine times, appearing in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, and Ps 48), the phrase is used figuratively of men in anguish at the prospect of defeat by an enemy army. Only in Mic 4:10 is such a party given hope. In this instance, it is “Daughter Zion,” encouraged, it would seem, to pass through straits of captivity and beyond to redemption. In the larger context of the mission of the Servant in Deutero-Isaiah, and the series of contrasts

between the Former Things and the Latter Things, I take the startlingly subversive or transformative dialectic of Isa 42:13–14 to lie at the heart of the shift from the Old Song to the New. In such conflictual conflicts God is victor in a manner that is imaged by the servant in Isa 50 and 53.

In short, I propose that in Ps 149 the “*mišpāt* written” refers specifically to the *mišpāt* // *tôrāh* of the first Servant Song in Isa 42:1–8, by this time written down. It is a *mišpāt* // *tôrāh* whose “bringing forth” as a “light to the nations” issues in the “new song” referred to in 42:10. And if the oracles of eight-century Isaiah, as written down and then studied, can spawn a prophetic tradition that re-surfaces in the exile in the oracles of Deutero-Isaiah; and if those oracles call for a “New Song” to celebrate the “new things” that God is about to do; and if in Deutero-Isaiah itself we see, in several places, a bursting forth into singing, not only by exilic Israel, but by jackals and ostriches, and even the trees of the fields clapping their hands; then we may well imagine this exilic and post-exilic visionary circle as composing, or inspiring, the other “New Songs” that appear in the Psalter now as Pss 33, 96 and 98—and Ps 149. And that brings me to the *mišpāt* written: The reference is to the *mišpāt* of God as embodied in the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah. It is in those servant passages that the singers of Ps 149 are to find their own thematic script. And that Servant script, in *imaging God*, subverts conventional wisdoms as to governing power. It subverts this conventional wisdom by identifying *human praise of a non-violent God* as the true “two-mouthed sword” by which one may celebrate, announce, and enact God’s *mišpāt*.

In precisely this way, Ps 149—and particularly v. 6—may be taken up on All Saints Day as one way of following the script laid down even further back, in Isa 2, of beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

I mentioned at the outset that the shape of the Psalter is in itself a proper object of study.

Those who currently engage this subject are divided as to whether the Davidic King still figures toward the end of the Psalter, or whether the Psalter ends with a focus on God as Israel’s King.¹⁶ I propose that in linking Ps 149 with the thematics

16 May one detect such an implication in Ps 149 in the verb, “adorn” (*pi’er*) in v. 4? Consider that of this verb’s 13 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, three come in Deutero-Isaiah, and five in Third Isaiah. In Deutero-Isaiah it occurs in the reflexive (*hitpa’el*) form, of God “getting himself glory” in Israel (Isa 44:23), and in the Servant as Israel (Isa 49:3). In Isa 55:5 it occurs in the factitive (*pi’el*) form, of God glorifying Israel as recipient of the “witnessing” commission of David vis-à-vis the peoples (the *lē’ummim*, as in Ps 149:7). In Third Isaiah it occurs twice in *pi’el* form, of God glorifying his (restored) house (Isa 60:7, 13; so too in Ezra 7:27), twice in *hitpa’el* form, of God getting himself glory through the restored people (Isa 60:21; 61:3), and once in *pi’el* form, echoing Isa 55:5, of God glorifying Israel (Isa 60:9). Given the prominence of this theme in Second and Third Isaiah, I suggest that the announcement in Ps 149:4, “he shall adorn (*pi’er*) the humble with victory,” echoes Isa 55:5 and 60:9, and in so doing, implicitly portrays the addressees in this psalm as the community now bearing the Davidic commission vis-à-vis the nations. This particular echo of Deutero-Isaiah joins the “New Song” connection with Deutero-Isaiah in cementing Ps 149’s

of Deutero-Isaiah, and specifically with the Servant figure there, Psalm 149 (as with Isa 55:3–5) portrays God’s covenant with David as now encompassing the whole messianic community, commissioned to the testifying task originally invested in the Davidic King. Those who meet the literal sword of the powers of *this* world with the High Praises of God in their throat *as like* a two-mouthed sword in *their* hand—these singers of the psalms, like the babes and sucklings of Ps 8, *are* the community of the Messiah. They are thereby the agents of God’s rule through the Son announced in Ps 2. It is this agency, faithfully carried through, that paves the way to the universal praise, or *tēhillāh*, of Ps 150.¹⁷

close relation to the other “eschatological hymns,” Pss 96 and 98 (and, I would additionally argue, Ps 33).

- 17 The study of Ps149 presented above was worked out independently, in simply following the implications of a construal of the conjunction in v. 6b as explicative, and then tracing other verbal and thematic leads back into Second Isaiah. I am gratified, then, in returning to the magnificent commentary of Erich Zenger, to see that much of what I had thought to identify—including, in particular, the explicative construal of the conjunction—finds general support in his own work, and even perhaps provides additional support for his general construals. See Erich Zenger in Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Hermeneia: Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 641–53. This three-volume commentary is a monument to the richness of theological and practical implication that can lie in the study of the Psalter as a dynamic intertextual whole informing its individual parts. On the theme of praise as a form of (non-violent) *power-enactment*, I am indebted to the work of Erhard Gerstenberger, as represented in his paper, “The Dynamics of Praise in the Ancient Near East, or Poetry and Politics,” delivered at the 2010 Annual Meeting of the *Society of Biblical Literature*, Atlanta, GA.