

## Psalm 1 and The Torah that Transplants

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### Abstract

It is increasingly appreciated that the Psalter is a shaped collection, and that it displays a movement, from Pss 1 and 2 with their announcement of leading themes and problematic counter-themes, along a tortuous path winding through those dialectical thematics, and arriving at an undialectical resolution in unqualified praise, in Ps 150, by “all who have breath.” The present paper seeks to demonstrate the significance, for this transformative movement of the verb *šātûl* in Ps 1:3, usually translated “planted,” but by some (and here) taken to mean more specifically “transplanted.” So understood, this verb forms the transitive nexus within the psalm itself, from the individual as solitary amid a hostile community in v. 1 to relocation amid the “congregation of the righteous” in v. 5. For the Psalter as a whole, the verb signals what happens to the individual who “meditates” on the Psalter “day and night” as God’s *tôrāh* or “instruction” in how to pray and praise. The Psalter transplants one from wherever one may find oneself amid the dialectics of life’s variable circumstances and into “the courts of God,” a location that is (as Ps 73:17 expressly illustrates) further transformative.

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In the present essay, I propose to examine two elements in Ps 1, the noun *tôrāh*, usually translated “law,” and the verb *šātûl*, usually translated “planted.” My primary focus will be on the verb. As I shall argue, these two words have a significance for our engagement with the Psalter—a significance for our own transformation in and through that engagement—that cannot be over-estimated.

I make the following assumptions, as supportable from the work of recent scholarship devoted to the Psalms and not needing argument here. (1) The Psalter is not just an aggregate of individual psalms somehow gathered together, but in

some sense is theologically shaped,<sup>1</sup> tracing a tortuous path toward an outcome, a *telos*. (2) Psalms 1 and 2 in their present form function as a joint introduction to the Psalter. (3) Key elements in these two psalms function as keynotes that will recur in subsequent psalms—keynotes serving to shepherd the diverse thematics in the various psalms along a path that, however tortuous, offers a “true and living way” to the *telos* of Ps 150.<sup>2</sup>

### A Brief Word on *tôrāh*

As commonly recognized, the word denotes teaching or instruction. It comes from the verb *hôrāh*, the meaning of which is graphically instanced in Exod 15:25 where Moses “cried to the LORD” and God “showed him [*wayyôrêhû*] a log.” If one were to translate the verb here as “directed him to,”<sup>3</sup> one could capture the semantic tones of the noun *tôrāh* as connoting “directions for living.” In “Ikea” terms, *tôrāh* offers “directions for assembling and enjoying a life.”

In special contexts, this word *tôrāh* can connote covenant law (as, prominently, in Deuteronomy), wisdom lore (as in the Book of Proverbs), and even, as in Isaiah, prophetic utterance (1:10; 8:16, 20; 30:9). John Goldingay has it that “[t]he Psalter’s central concern is to teach people to praise, pray, and testify,” and he proposes that “perhaps the teaching to which it invites meditation is its own teaching on praise, prayer, and testimony.”<sup>4</sup> One can cite H. J. Kraus, James L. Mays, and Clinton McCann, among others, to similar effect. But if the Psalter is, by this word at the very outset, introduced as a set of “directions for praising, praying, and testifying,” it does not merely “point out” how to carry out such practices. Like an Ikea website that includes a video demonstrating how to assemble the furniture, the Psalter proceeds to provide scores and scores of examples of how to begin and how to continue in these practices. More on this later.

### *šātûl* as “Transplanted”

I turn, now, to the main focus of this paper, the verb *šātûl*. Occurring ten times in the Hebrew Bible, it is usually translated simply as “planted,” beginning with

1 Poets will gather poems that often were composed as separate, free-standing pieces, into collections that are so shaped as to constitute a coherent body of poems—what Robert Frost on one occasion referred to as “constellations of intention.” The Psalter displays many such sub-groupings, shaped into constellations of theological intention; for example, Pss 93–100, as David M. Howard has shown; see David M. Howard, Jr., *The Structure of Psalms 93–100*, Biblical and Judaic Studies 5 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997). These constellations then go on to make up the Psalter as a galaxy that in its own way “declares the glory of God” and “shows forth his handiwork.”

2 So, for example, Jerome Creach has shown how the word “refuge” in Ps 2 (together with associated words and images) occurs at strategic points to shape the Psalter and to guide its user to that “refuge.” Jerome F. D. Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. JSOTSup 217 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996).

3 In Prov 6:13, the verb makes explicit this connotation of “pointing out” as with one’s finger.

4 John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1–41* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 84.

the Greek Septuagint that rendered it in Ps 1:3 (and Ps 92:14) with the verb *pefuteumenon*. But the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE Jewish scholar Aquila, whose recension of the LXX is rigorously literal, in both places has *metapefuteumenon*, “transplanted,” and in this was apparently followed by Symmachus and Theodotion in their recensions of the LXX.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Latin Vulgate in both places reads *transplantatum*, and at least a dozen modern commentators take the verb in Ps 1:3 with this connotation.<sup>6</sup> Finally, among the three most eminent modern lexicons the majority judgment is as follows. The Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon* of 1907 offers only “transplant” for *šātal* and “transplanted shoot, slip,” for the noun, *šātil* (Ps 128:3).<sup>7</sup> For its part, the Koehler-Baumgartner-Stamm *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (2000), while recognizing that an Arabic cognate verb *šatala* means “to plant, transplant,” stays with “plant” alone for verb and noun in Hebrew.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, the multi-volume *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, edited by David J. A. Clines (1993–2011), lists as the primary meaning “transplant,” and only in sub-entries 1 and 2 (active and passive voices, respectively) does it give the meaning as “transplant, plant,” while for the noun *šātil* it gives the meaning “(transplanted) shoot.”<sup>9</sup>

Careful study of *šātal* in all its occurrences leads me to concur with the two lexicons and with the indicated ancient and modern interpreters. But even such commentators are for the most part preoccupied with the tree’s fruitfulness, and they overlook the connotations implicit in the verb as a “kinesthetic image,” what

5 Thomas Reider and Nigel Turner, *An Index to Aquila: Greek-Hebrew / Hebrew-Greek / Latin-Hebrew with the Syriac and Armenian Evidence*, Vetus Testamentum, Supplements, vol. 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 157.

6 T. K. Cheyne, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1904), 1; W. S. McCullough and W. R. Taylor, “The Book of Psalms,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1955), 21; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: 1–50: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 1: “[c]ommentators are correct in insisting that *shatal* properly means ‘transplanted’ rather than ‘to plant’”; A. A. Anderson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, The New Century Bible (London: Oliphant, 1972), 60; J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 1–50* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 17; \*G. F. A. Knight, *Psalms*, Daily Study Bible, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 17; Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms 1* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), 61; Martin S. Rozenberg and Bernard M. Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms: A New Translation and Commentary* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 1999), 1; Peter C. Craigie and Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 2004), 57; \*John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1*, 84; J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 685; and Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 140. (Those who qualify the choice with “perhaps” are asterisked.)

7 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907).

8 Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, with Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2000).

9 David J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993–2011).

Freud calls a *Bewegungsbild*.<sup>10</sup> They overlook the action undergone that renders the tree capable of such flourishing. I take the temporal process implicit in *šātûl* as a *Bewegungsbild*, as the keynote to the psalm and to the Psalter. It images what happens, over time, within one who delights in the psalms and their *tôrâh*.

Importantly, and strategically, the verb *šātûl* is in the passive voice, a voice that is under-appreciated. In writing, students are often urged to use the active voice, an urging that betrays our preoccupation with active power, the power to effect change, and our depreciation of passive or passionial power, the power to undergo change. Where the focus in a sentence is on who or what effects the change, then we properly use the active voice. When the focus falls on who or what undergoes the change, then we should properly use the passive voice. The point is nicely illustrated in Rom 14:4, as brought out by the translation in the *American Standard Version*:

Who art thou that judgest the servant of another?

To his own lord he standeth [*stēkei*, active voice, intransitive] or falleth.

Yea, he shall be made to stand [*stathēsetai*, passive voice];

for the Lord hath power to make him stand [*stēsai*], active voice, causative].

The passage begins with a critique of one person's judgment of another.<sup>11</sup> In the following three clauses the focus in the first two clauses falls on the individual who is being unfairly judged. First, the general fact: a servant stands or falls before the master's judgment. Second, the specific instance: a loyal servant of God will be enabled to stand. The shift to the passive voice throws the focus on one who, under religious censure by others, may be fearful of standing in the final judgment, and the clause gives assurance of being enabled to stand. Third, the shift back to the active voice, but this time with causative connotation, makes explicit and underscores that it is God who will so enable.

Consider, then, the imagery in Ps 1 where the '*ašrê* ("blessed / happy / enviable"<sup>12</sup>) individual does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, stand in the way

10 For the phrase "kinesthetic image" and the citation of Freud's term, see Hans W. Loewald, "On Motivation and Instinct Theory," in his *The Essential Loewald: Collected Papers and Monographs*, (Hagerstown, Maryland: University Publishing Group, 2000), 130–31. In reference to *šātûl* as such an image, and with an eye to the term, "way, path," in Ps 1:6, I would translate *Bewegungsbild* as "image of movement along a path."

11 As, interestingly enough, when the gang in Ps 1 heaps scorn on the lone individual.

12 On the translation of this word, see William P. Brown, "Happiness and Its Discontents in the Psalms," in Brent A. Strawn, ed., *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 98–99. As he summarizes, "the saying [initiated by this word] commends a condition, practice, or virtue considered eminently desirable . . . an externally observable objective condition of well-being." He cites Waldemar Janzen, "'*ašrê* in the Old Testament," *HTR* 58 (1965): 215–26, which takes the individual as one in an enviable state.

of sinners, or sit in the seat of scorners. Delighting in God's *tôrāh* and mulling over it day and night, she is transplanted into the "congregation of the righteous"—whereas the wicked will not be able to "stand" in the judgment. This divine judgment forms an *inclusio* by the way it stands over against human judgments underlying and implicit in the "scorn."

The passive voice in the verb *šātûl* serves as the fulcrum for the psalm's internal shift in locus. The *tôrāh*-devotee does not transplant herself; she becomes transplanted. This verb is the dynamic key to the teleological movement within the psalm, and this movement within the psalm prefigures the teleological trajectory the Psalter traces along its tortuous path to Ps 150.

### Transplanted through Meditation with the Psalms as *tôrāh*

But how does one become transplanted by *tôrāh*? The key is in the verb *hāgāh*. This verb refers to oral activity, a low, interior utterance, at times a groaning or moaning or sighing, at times a *sub rosa* meditative reflection.<sup>13</sup> The practice of such interior verbalizing is at home in the ancient system of learning where the student hears and then repeats the teacher's words until they become ingrained, informing the student's responsive perceiving, reflecting, understanding, and speaking.

In his book *The Person*, Theodore Lidz writes that we are born with a genetic inheritance and into a cultural inheritance. Language is critical. He illustrates with the story of Helen Keller's awakening through acquiring language at the hands of Annie Sullivan.<sup>14</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge puts the matter in his own inimitable way. Writing on "the Origin of the Idea of God in the Mind of Man," he locates this origin in the interaction between newborn infant and mother, whereby the mother's warm, nourishing bosom, her kisses, her smiles, and her first sounds excite and awaken the idea of God that is already enscribed in the infant's organic being but lies slumbering there. If emergence from the womb is an infant's physical transplantation to a new realm, in which its organic rootage through the umbilical cord is succeeded by rootage at the breast, its social-spiritual transplantation, for Coleridge, comes in and through this vocal interaction.<sup>15</sup> In another place, he describes these mother-infant interactions, first, simply:

Tones as spontaneous now, and necessitated, by the Structure in part  
but still more by the sensitiveness and sensibility of the human  
infant[.]

13 Psalm 119 doesn't use *hāgāh*, but repeatedly it uses *siāh*, a close synonym, to the same effect as *hāgāh* in Ps 1. Compare the cognate noun *hegeh* in Ezek 2:10 ("words of . . . mourning"), Ps 90:9 ("sigh"), and Job 37:2 ("rumbling . . . from his mouth").

14 Theodore Lidz, *The Person: His Development throughout the Life Cycle* (New York: Basic, 1968), 3–5, 17.

15 Thomas McFarland, ed., *Opus Maximum: The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 15 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 121–22.

Simply inarticulate tones at this point . . . like the *hāgāh* of the psalmist? But then, gradually, in the infant,

[a]rticulation[,] the natural result of sensations overtaking each other—before the tone or cry from [the infant] has ceased, it is checked & deprest, and its place supplied by the Tone from [the mother] . . . a distinction without break of continuity is the Result. But this is *Articulation*. And then commences the Tale, or the Grammar of Nature, or the Book, Parentage and Education of the Parts of Speech.<sup>16</sup>

Just so, in his view, the *imago dei* slumbering in the infant soul is awakened in and through this process. The infant, born with a genetic heritage, is borne into—transplanted into—a cultural heritage by the infant’s *hāgāh*-like imitation of its mother’s voice.

I return, then, to the relation between the active and passive voice. I underscore that the passive voice is the voice of passive power, not of inertia or powerlessness. As Aristotle, John Locke, and Coleridge all emphasize, passive power is a form of agency. As the power of sensitive receptivity, it lies at the root of compassion or sympathy. Not apathy but sympathy. Like symphony, sympathy is rooted in resonance, interpersonal resonance. In Coleridge’s example, it is the infant’s resonant repetition of the mother’s tones, at first flowingly inarticulate, then gradually articulated into words and sentences, at each step the infant following the mother, allowing the mother’s sounds to shape and evoke its answering sounds. This early form of passive or passional power ends with the power to speak up and speak out in public—what the Greeks called *parrhēsia*, “freedom and boldness of speech.” A privilege in Athens, *parrhesia* was confined to male citizens as alone qualified to stand in the assembly, a standing denied to women, children, and slaves.

The power of the *tôrāh* in the Psalter—teaching us, in John Goldingay’s words, how to pray, praise, and testify—is the power, the *energeia*, to transplant us from a realm of muteness into a place, a standing, where we are able to find our own voice and speak out boldly. It is often observed that there is an intimate connection between the voice of Job and the voices we hear in the Psalms. One might suppose that the power he enjoys in voicing his grievances and his griefs is a power he has received from his immersion in the sort of psalmistic practice that we have in the Psalter. In the Psalms, we learn to speak candidly to God, *de profundis*, from out of our depths. If, in our despair, we make our bed in Sheol (if our

16 Kathleen Coburn and Anthony John Harding, ed., *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 5: 1827–1834*, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), note 5531 f3-f5v. The quoted paragraph concludes a concise essay with the title, “Language supposes Society as the condition of its Beginning” (note 5531 f2-f5v).

despair *is* our Sheol), God is there; if we flee from our enemies to the corners of the earth, even there God will be present to lead us, and God's right hand will keep hold of us. All this because, as Ps 139:15 testifies, our very beginnings in the womb took form *bassēter*, in "*the secret place*"—that maternal place likened to "the secret place of the Most High."

### The Fruit of the Transplanted

This brings us to Ps 92 where we read (vv. 12–14): "The righteous flourish like the palm tree, / and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. / They are transplanted [*šātūl*] into the house of the LORD, / they flourish in the courts of our God. / They still bring forth fruit in old age, / they are ever full of sap and green, / to show that the LORD is upright; / he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him." This set of images signals to us that the psalmist, at this point in the pilgrimage from Ps 1, begins proleptically to experience the *telos* to which the Psalms finally transplant us—the inner presence of God, the *sēter*, the "secret place of the Most High."<sup>17</sup> (One might take the localities, "house of the LORD" and "courts of our God" as specifications of the more general "congregation of the righteous" in Ps 1.)

But what sort of "fruit" may one hope to bear in old age? At age 84, the novelist Philip Roth notes that "in just a matter of months I'll depart old age to enter deep old age." His interviewer asks, "Now that you've retired as a novelist, do you ever miss writing, or think about un-retiring?" Roth responds,

No, I don't . . . by 2010 I had a strong suspicion that I'd done my best work and anything more would be inferior. I was by this time no longer in possession of the mental vitality or the verbal energy or the physical fitness needed to mount and sustain a large creative attack of any duration on a complex structure as demanding as a novel . . . Every talent has its terms—its nature, its scope, its force; also its term, a tenure, a life span . . . Not everyone can be fruitful forever.<sup>18</sup>

But what if one's "talent" is the capacity for praise? After all, that is what one does in a sanctuary—even as an infant's post-nursing, cooing response to its mother is what the infant does in that presence. Even so, Hosea would have us say to God, "Take away all iniquity; accept that which is good and we will render the fruit of our lips" (Hos 14:2). And the writer of the book of Hebrews urges, "Through [Christ] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Heb 13:15). Simply, our "fruit" is our resonant response to the resonant grace of God.

17 One may note the interplay between the "secret place" and "refuge" of the Most High in Ps 91 and the "house/courts" of God in Ps 92.

18 Charles McGrath, *New York Times*, January 16, 2018.

If, then, the fruit that Ps 92 has us bearing is the fruit of praise, does this invite us to return to Ps 1, and in retrospect to hear in that psalm's reference to "fruit" also an implicit reference to praise? This would give added point to John Goldingay's comment that "[t]he Psalter's central concern is to teach people to praise, pray, and testify," and that "[p]erhaps the teaching to which it invites meditation is its own teaching on praise, prayer, and testimony."<sup>19</sup>

Psalm 92 affirms that this fruit we may bear, and offer to God, even as our physical bodies lose their vigor. And if our mental faculties begin to fail us, what then? Coleridge more than once asked this question in reference to himself; and in one late notebook entry on "old age" as a "Sabbath of our Life," he concluded, "when even the Judgement is gone, and the Reason can but feebly work in and by the Understanding—Conscience, Love, Hope, Faith have shone out, and illumined the face of the dying man as with an inward Sunshine."<sup>20</sup>

And where they have ceased to shine out for you and me to see, we may trust that *bassēter*, in the "secret place of the Most High," where another's life is "hid with Christ in God"—hidden, perhaps, even from that person's own inner consciousness—the rapport and the resonance continues, deep unto deep, and in that depth, face to face.

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19 Goldingay, *Psalms*, 84.

20 Coburn and Harding, ed., *The Notebooks*, note 6701 *f11v*.