



Dualing (Read: Dueling) *Psalmos*

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Among the many striking features of the Psalter, one of the more interesting structural features is the “doubling” of certain psalms. I mean “structural” both in terms of the overall ordering or composition of the book of Psalms and in terms of these several psalms themselves. The psalms that are a part of the so-called “double traditions,” or dual-psalms, are two psalm-pairs, Psalms 14 and 53, and Psalms 40:14–18 and 70, as well as one psalm-trio (of sorts), 57:8–12/60:7–14 and 108.¹

In examining these psalms, I will first make some observations about persona as an interpretive lens. It is my contention that taking into account the differences or shifts in persona between these dual-psalms creates space for us to appreciate the impact of each psalm differently. The “dualing” of these psalms or portions of psalms isn’t simple repetition, nor are the shifts in persona and voice

¹ A number of other doublings occur in the Old Testament. There is the pastiche-psalm of 1 Chronicles 16, and the use of Psalm 18 in 2 Samuel 22, as well as the doubling of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5 and Exodus 20. In dealing with Psalm 70, Erich Zenger writes, “This psalm . . . belongs to the so-called biblical double traditions, that is, those texts that have been handed down twice, although in different textual contexts. The most familiar examples are the Decalogue (Exodus 20 = Deuteronomy 5) and the vision of eschatological peace in Isa 2:1–4 = Mic 4:1–4. . . . Psalm 50 is a ‘double’ of Psalm 14, and parts of Psalms 57 and 60 were taken and combined into the new psalm 108.” In Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 50–100*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 186. Each of these is beyond the scope of what I am able to address here.

One of the features of Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament is the use of repetition, which some modern readers find irksome. Some psalms seem to be repeats of previous ones. But differences between these “dual” psalms suggest subtle changes that lead to deeper and more nuanced interpretation.

the only differences. It wasn't until I had immersed myself in them for a while that I realized, perhaps hearing my teacher Mark Throntveit's winsome chuckle as he said something about chiasms, that persona wasn't the only factor in play. So, I started to think structurally. I couldn't find any chiasms, but I did notice there was a lot going on in terms of structure.

Second, I will make note of both the structural nature of the shift in persona and the location of these psalm-pairs in the Psalter. Finally, and primarily, I will compare these dualing (dueling) psalms with eyes and ears attuned to reading or hearing each one not just as it stands alone, but as a part of a pair—a duet, if you will. My proposal is a side-by-side, “stereo” reading of these psalms.²

PERSONA AS INTERPRETIVE LENS: WHEN TWO VOICES SING THE SAME SONG DIFFERENTLY

When it comes to reading a given psalm, there is often (always?) an “I,” a person or people who have a place in the psalm: the author of the poem, the voice that speaks or prays or sings it, the people for whom the psalm is prayed or sung. Whether that voice is a priest's or a liturgical leader's or the king's or the lay, vow-keeping Israelite's, that voice ought not simply to be ignored. Even when it is impossible to know with any certainty whose voice one ought to be identifying, persona/voice matters. My contention is that:

the author of the psalm stages the poem in such a way that a particular voice is heard or experienced. . . . The pray-er of the psalm then takes up this anthem, borrowing language that is in harmony with the current personal situation, and in so doing seeks to make sense of one's own world.

To think about the relationship that the reader may have with this “person” who composed the poem, leads to asking the basic but important question of who the persona is in the psalm, and what that persona means to me.³

Additionally:

The concept of persona arises not only out of attributed authorship, but also out of a sense that *the psalm is meant to be tried out and tried on by the reader*.⁴

The psalms themselves—and, presumably, their redactors, collectors, and performers—worked with persona/voice. And when within the Psalter the

² It seems fitting to use musical metaphors in this piece, as music is another of Mark's great loves.

³ Rolf A. Jacobson and Karl N. Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 95–96.

⁴ Jacobson and Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms*, 116.

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Much of the interpretation of the so-called “biblical double traditions”—in our case the dualing of certain psalms—stresses that while comparison may be fruitful, interpreting each psalm “as it stands alone” is vital. As Rolf Jacobson and Beth Tanner note in their respective commentaries on Psalms 14 and 53:

Questions regarding the genetic relationship between the two poems and how to resolve the slight textual differences between them are generally unhelpful. The approach taken in this commentary is that the two psalms should be treated as individual, albeit nearly identical, psalms.⁵

And:

These differences confirm that psalms were adapted for different circumstances and for use in different communities, and as such, they should be treated separately, instead of as a redacted or corrupted version of the other.⁶

I am, genetically (and collegially), predisposed to agree. Finding the ur-psalm in or behind the pairs is a challenging and tenuous project. But the very fact that these psalms are repetitions *with differences* seems to me to urge intertextual, comparative readings.

There is in each pair of the dual-psalms something that *is* different: something distinctive, something shifting from one version—or, perhaps better, one *part*—to another. Therefore, it may be a fruitful enterprise to read these pairings in conversation with one another—which many commentators simply do not do. When read together, the differences between the pairs result in a strangely discordant chorus, and a different meaning. To further the musical metaphor, reading these psalms side-by-side, with their shared notes and similar tone but different voicing, is not unlike hearing a pair of dueling banjos.

⁵ Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 164.

⁶ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 464.

STRUCTURE AND THE DOUBLE TRADITIONS

As was mentioned above, the dualing of these psalms is not simple repetition; there are changes made to each psalm or psalm-pair—structural changes that allow these similar psalms to make meaning differently.

In the first place, there seems to be something to the location of certain of these psalms in the larger book(s). Each of these psalm-sets finds part of its expression in Book 2 (42–72) of the Psalter. Psalms 53, 57/60, and 70 are all there. As Gunkel wrote:

The fact that the collector of Pss 42–72 should be distinguished from the collector of the whole is also evident from the fact that . . . individual songs collected in 42–72 occur outside this framework. If the psalter was only compiled from individual psalms rather than the use of smaller collections, then the appearance of doublets could not be explained.⁷

There may be an argument to be made that there is more on the line here than the existence and use of smaller collections. It may be that the role of persona and *Sitz-im-Leben* represented in the dualing of psalms is one of the characteristic features (if a relatively small one) of the Psalter's second book.

What follows are speculations that are just that—speculative. But they are suggestive of an approach to reading these psalms. I would not want to suggest that these are sure and sound conclusions that *must* be drawn, but rather that this is one possibility for an approach to these psalms.

On the one hand, Gunkel's "collector" of the Second Book of the Psalter may be, it seems, something of a master-mixer, a structural re-composer who takes other psalms and reworks them—Psalm 53 "covering" Psalm 14, and Psalm 70 "sampling" Psalm 40:14–18. On the other hand, that collector has influenced the collector of the Fifth Book, who has borrowed twice from him in the new composition of Psalm 108, using Psalms 57:8–12 and 60:7–14 to make a sort of "medley."

A second observation is that one of the most obvious structural changes in these psalms has to do with their superscriptions. In each case there is a different structural beginning to the psalm-pairs.

Psalm 53 takes Psalm 14's superscription, "To the leader. Of David," and adds to it both a reference to a musical tune or instrument, *'al-maḥalat*, "according to the Mahalath," which for our purposes we will translate as "on the banjo," and also a designation for a certain type of psalm, a *maskil*. The *maskil* is a kind of instructional or wisdom poem, and the shift in superscription mirrors the shift in persona, which we will see more fully below. Psalm 53 makes of Psalm 14's plea a word of instructed hope (more below).

⁷ Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 343.

While we do not actually see the superscription of Psalm 40 in the borrowed portion, there is still a structural change to be had in that regard. Psalm 70 takes Psalm 40's opening, "To the leader. Of David. A Psalm," and makes of it, "To the leader. Of David, for the memorial offering." "For the memorial offering" in Hebrew is *lehazkir*, and it is derived from the basic Hebrew word for remembering, *zakar*. Here, it is used in the *hiphil* infinitive construct, which I would render quite literally as "to cause to remember." Here in Psalm 70, as in Psalm 38, this title is used as a part of a liturgical psalm appointed for the observation of the memorial offering. Both Psalms 38 and 70 are prayers for help, and so Psalm 70, which may have been a part of a memorial offering meant to cause *God* to remember, plays itself out in a manner more abrupt, functionally, than the psalm it is riffing on. This abruptness may well be couched in the shift in superscription.

These changes, these "musical" meditations, riffs, and rills of persona and structure between these dualing psalms, suggest a rich reading if, à la such musical collaborations, point and counter point are heard together.

Finally, and most fully, there is a much more abrupt shift in the superscriptions represented in the three-piece psalm-interplay of Psalms 57 and 60 in Psalm 108. In both Psalms 57 and 60 we find moments attached to King David's story, the psalm finding a setting of sorts in the life of the king: "when he fled from Saul, in the cave" (Psalm 57), and "when he struggled with Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return killed twelve thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt" (Psalm 60). Both of these psalms fall under another rubric as well: each is a *miktam*. The meaning of "*miktam*" is not understood with any surety, but for our purposes may (in part because of the stories of David's life to which these psalms are set) be taken to mean something like "inscription," as the Old Greek has it. And what of Psalm 108? Other than the ubiquitous "A Psalm of David," all references to a time in David's life are effaced, and the psalm is called "A song." This, too, follows the change in persona and voice that we will see more fully below, as Psalm 108 shifts the force of the psalm.

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A PSALM-COVER: *PSALMS 14 AND 53*

It is often noted that these psalms are, essentially, the same, with what are usually called "minor" differences. The key difference is found in verses 5–6 of Psalm 14, and verse 5 of Psalm 53:

⁵There they shall be in great terror,
for God is with the company of the
righteous.

⁶You would confound the plans of the
poor,
but the Lord is their refuge.

⁶There they shall be in great terror,
in terror such as has not been.
For God will scatter the bones of the
ungodly;
they will be put to shame, for God
has rejected them.

There is actually quite a bit that is different here. Psalm 53:5 is an extended verse, which spans two verses of Psalm 14. In 14, the terror that comes, brought on as it is by God's presence, is a rebuke against the foolish, who, in the first verse of the psalm, are accused of corruption, abominable deeds, and a kind of disdain for God's presence and power that allows for the persecution of the "company of the righteous." The persona here is of one who speaks theologically to the enemy on behalf of God's people. Here, God is described. It is as if the psalmist were saying, "This is the kind of God our Yahweh is: a God who shows up, and when Yahweh shows up, won't you feel stupid."

In 53 that same terror is again brought on by God's presence in response to the foolish claims of God's absence, but this time the heretofore unknown terror is a word of hope spoken, as it were, as a rebuttal against those fools. The persona here is of one who speaks theologically to God's people. It is as if the psalmist were saying, "This is what you can expect from your God: your God will show up for you!"

The substance of the awe and fear brought on by God's expected arrival is the same. So too is the denouement. The final verse of each setting of the psalm⁸ is the same:

⁷O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!
When the Lord [when God] restores the fortunes of his people,
Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

As Beth Tanner notes, this is a wish for restoration.⁹ And as Rolf Jacobson notes, it is a double wish, which expects the enemy to get theirs, so to speak.¹⁰ The result is the same—deliverance comes. But the tone, because of the shift in persona, of voice, is different. Psalm 53 seems, to lean on Tanner again, certain of God's attitude toward the people and that God will act on their behalf, but still unsure of exactly when that will happen.¹¹ This becomes, in Psalm 53, a word of instructed hope that rounds out the psalm, while in Psalm 14, claiming that same certainty makes for a threat.

The persona of Psalm 14 might be characterized, imaginatively, as that of a little brother telling his older brother (read: tormentor), "You're gonna get it when

⁸ Psalm 53:7 in NRSV.

⁹ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 465.

¹⁰ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 167–68.

¹¹ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 467.

Mom gets home.” The persona of Psalm 53 is of an older sister reassuring her little brother, “Don’t worry, Mom will get home soon.” And here is the beauty of these different voices, these different psalmists both speaking: both may be right; both have a voice, a part, a piece of the score. Heard together, and not just separately, the tension of these two meanings is honored.

The key shift of persona is in the addressee—is it the fools, or those plagued by fools to whom the persona of the psalms speak? As Zenger points out, these psalms, the same in essence, finally end up working out to very “different pragmatic approaches.”¹² Psalm 53 puts its own spin, in its own style, on Psalm 14’s rhyme and meter. As all good covers should.

PSALMS AND SAMPLING: *PSALMS 40:14–18* AND *70*

In music, “sampling” is borrowing a part of a recording of a song to be used in a new recording or performance. Sampling layers, speeds up or slows down, doubles a part of a song, or employs other techniques to make use of it in a new way.

Whereas Psalms 14 and 53 can be recognized as dual-psalms in their entirety, Psalm 70 stands alone as a complete prayer for help,¹⁴ while its six verses mirror only a portion of Psalm 40.

It has been remarked that Psalm 40 is a somewhat distinctive version of the psalm of thanksgiving. As Goldingay puts it, this is “a psalm [which] pleads for deliverance from affliction that issues from sin.” The first twelve verses are a testimony “to a past experience of Yhwh’s deliverance. . . . But then this testimony turns out to be the introduction to a further plea for deliverance . . . lengthy praise material turns out to be preparation for a prayer of protest.”¹⁵ The psalm then turns and ends with “an unexpected final section,” unexpected because the portion of the psalm that is a prayer for help does not end with the expected vow of thanksgiving, no doubt because it *began* in thanksgiving; still, the reversal of expectation is jarring.

Psalm 70, representing only the prayer for help, is therefore all the more jarring when it does not turn to a vow to praise.¹⁶ Once again the two psalms are largely the same—in fact, in the NRSV at least, the bulk of the differences in the translation between 40:15 and 70:3 are inexplicable:

¹² Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalm 2*, 30.

¹³ Verses 13–17 in NRSV.

¹⁴ John Goldingay on Psalm 40: “Conversely vv. 13–17 could stand on their own as a prayer psalm; they do stand on their own in a variant form as Ps. 70, though as a unit they then manifest an ‘unusual brevity and terseness’ (John Goldingay, *Psalms 1–41*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 568.

¹⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms 1–41*, 576.

¹⁶ Zenger argues that Psalm 70 is marked by its vagueness and by “conventionalized” language, and is thus seen as a sort of formula for use. For Zenger, Psalm 40:14–18 is the adoption of Psalm 70, which is joined to an existing psalm (40:2–11) by means of a new verse (40:12–13; see Hossfeld and Zenger, 187). But if this is the case, why the switch *back* from the so-called Elohist Psalter’s “Elohim” to the use of “YHWH” in 40:13? It is confusing, to say the least.

¹⁵ Let those *be appalled* because of
their shame
who say to me, “Aha, Aha!”

³ Let those who say, “Aha, Aha!”
turn back because of their shame.

Other than a single verb—*yashomu* vs. *yashubu*, “be appalled” or “be turned back”—the word order and sense of the two verses are identical and should be translated as such.

The significant difference between the two comes in the final verses, 40:18 and 70:6¹⁷, wherein the person praying the psalm appears to be addressing—intoning—the conclusion differently:

¹⁸ As for me, I am poor and needy,
but the Lord takes thought for me.
You are my help and my deliverer;
do not delay, O my God.

⁶ As for me, I am poor and needy;
hasten to me, O God!
You are my help and my deliverer;
O Lord, do not delay!

Psalm 40 expresses the psalmist’s need for deliverance from those who seek to snatch away her life by recalling—if not the details—the actuality of a prior deliverance: “The Lord takes thought for me.” This is how the Lord is: thoughtful, mindful of the psalmist. Psalm 70, without the remembered past to call upon, makes of the same sense expressed in the final colon of the poem, “You are my helper and deliverer,” an elongated plea: “Hasten to me, O God!”

The tension of the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the psalmist, one of interpersonal trial, is responded to and expressed differently, despite many shared notes, rills, and flourishes. Psalm 40 is an expression of patient confidence. Psalm 70 is an expression of impatient pleading.

One of the striking elements of Psalm 40:1–13 is the backdrop for its plea. Verse 8 speaks of the psalmist’s looking up in “the scroll of the book” and pointing to what she has experienced and done in relationship with God. There is comfort, and time, to look back upon a life lived in relationship with God.¹⁸ Psalm 70 does not afford that luxury of time. There is no recourse to the past, no flipping through the pages of one’s life to find the evidence of God’s fidelity; there is only urgent need. To quote again from Tanner et al.,

It is as if the prayer was lifted in such a hurry that there is no time to explain in more detail. One can almost imagine that the fuller form in Psalm 40 (“I waited intently for the LORD, he turned and heard my cry”) will have to wait for another day when the situation is less urgent.¹⁹

This move to brevity, to immediacy, is why here I am taking Psalm 70 as an abbreviation of Psalm 40. Not all would agree, but the sampling of a smaller piece of what may have been a familiar psalm would heighten the impact of the shifts in the

¹⁷ Verses 40:17 and 70:5 in NRSV.

¹⁸ Verse 7 in NRSV.

¹⁹ deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 565.

abbreviation. And when read together as different voices uttering almost identical words, the tension—the possibility and the limitations, the hope and the fear, the patience and the impatience—serves to express fully the range and the scale of lived experience and reality.

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MEDLEY-MAKING: PSALMS 57:8–12; 60:7–14; AND 108

By far the most complex in terms of the dualing nature of portions of two psalms mirroring a complete, single psalm, these psalms are also the least shifty—the least different.

As with Psalm 40, Psalm 108 moves from confidence and praise, to petition. But unlike the portion of Psalm 40, the other parts of Psalms 57 and 60 are not marked by hymnic praise or thanksgiving. Both 57 and 60 are prayers for help; Psalm 57 is purely individual, while 60 is purely communal. And then there is Psalm 108, which mixes the individual and the communal.

Again, the differences between the two psalms, the pastiche of 57/60, and the discrete 108, are relatively few and largely minor. The key difference lies in the seventh verse of both Psalms 60 and 108.²⁰

⁷ Give victory with your right hand,
and answer *us*,
so that those whom you love may be
rescued.

⁷ Give victory with your right hand,
and answer *me*,
so that those whom you love may be
rescued.

Here, perhaps most clearly or obviously, is a shift in persona.

In Psalm 60 the plural carries through to the end of the psalm, which wrestles with questions of national rejection by God, who does not “go out . . . with *our* armies.” This is turned into a plea that God *would* do so once again, and the confidence that with God “*we* shall do valiantly.” Psalm 108 wrestles with the same questions and articulates the same plea, but the singular “*me*” is interjected to speak on behalf of the collective “*us*.”

Psalm 108 as a single psalm has elements of two psalms that are very different in that one is individual and the other communal. In Psalm 108, however, we find individual/communal all at once. The difference between the psalms, the shift

²⁰ Verses 5 and 6 in NRSV.

between them, is one of number. Psalm 57 is an individual's prayer. Psalm 60 is the people's prayer. Psalm 108 is a medley-prayer of an individual *for* the people.

This is, of course, not unique, either to the Psalms or in the biblical material as a whole. One might keep in mind here Deuteronomy 5, Joshua 24, and Psalms 78 and 106 among others, in which there is an interplay between the individual and the corporate. What is striking is that this is a single psalm, mirroring portions of two very different psalms. And this *is* unique.

Reading these psalms side-by-side might actually ease the sense of discord from the me/I/my to the us/our to the I/we. Certainly the senses of Psalms 57 and 60, read together by Psalm 108, are altered and expanded.

CONCLUSIONS

So, what are we to make of all of this? What does it mean to read these differing psalms as a chorus of pairs? Reading the dualing *psalmos* as such—reading them in conversation, in duet—allows for a larger reading of these psalms. Reading these psalms in isolation certainly has merit, but reading them together expands the interpretive range in a significant way.

I have sought to explore the interpretive tension and possibility in three examples of a shifting persona and shifting structure in these psalms:

1. 14/53, a shift in addressee: wherein one, the pray-er speaks to the fool, and in the other, it is those plagued by the foolish who are addressed.
2. 40/70, a shift in the content or tone of the address: from patient hope to impatient plea.
3. 57; 60/108, a shift in number: *my* prayer and *our* prayer become *my* prayer for *us*.

The author of a psalm stages the poem in such a way that a particular voice is heard or experienced. When the same material is staged differently, and explicitly so, this allows for a multivalence of meaning and application that is distinctive. And when the same material, staged differently, is read in tandem, as duet, it becomes its own composition. In other words, this is not Devo doing “Satisfaction” by the Stones, or Beyoncé doing “At Last” by Etta James, but Run DMC doing “Walk This Way” with Aerosmith. Or dualing *psalmos*.

After one of the 2014 sessions of the Book of Psalms Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, Diane Jacobson remarked that there is a need for the interpreter to own the “I” of the psalm. This is an imaginative reading of the psalm that is encouraged, invited, and modeled for us in the dual-psalms. And we are not only free but, I might suggest, invited to tune our readings and interpretations in just such a way. ⊕

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