



Too Tall a Tale, Or: Do the Psalms Really Tell “Stories”?

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The present of discourse or articulation cannot be reduced to the narrating of past events; on the contrary, the narrated events seem to be subsumed by, trumped by, the present of lyric enunciation (narrating is no longer the right word).

Jonathan Culler¹

THE POWER OF STORY

Stories—good ones, at any rate—are powerful. That, at least, is what people *claim* about stories, and since most of us have heard a good story or two, we would likely agree. This claim about and the very real experience of “story power” have led to a proliferation of stories everywhere in almost every type of entertainment media. If one isn’t careful, the apparent power and palpable ubiquity of story give the impression that “narrative”² is somehow fundamental and universal, even

¹ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 36.

² Let “story” and “narrative” stand as synonyms for the time being. In point of fact, they may be helpfully differentiated, with *story* the “content” or “what” of narrative, which is also comprised of *discourse*, the

Although it might seem that the psalms are attempts to construct a narrative story, this article argues that this is not the case. By a careful examination of the category of narrative, it is suggested that the psalms are actually not narratives, but an attempt by means of lyric poetry to create a present reality into which the reader is drawn.

intrinsic to what it means to be human.³ In this perspective, the human being is *Homo narrans*, the storytelling human,⁴ and so, to put it in the words of a recent book title, human beings must “story or die.”⁵ Physicians and scientists would likely beg to differ, putting things like breathing, eating/drinking, sleeping, and reproduction considerably higher than “narrativizing” when it comes to the survival of the species.

If one can forgive the neologism, “narrativizing” seems to be the exactly right word for the present predominance of narrative in a whole host of disciplines. *Narrative*, of course, is a noun, but *narrativizing* is a participle, an action word, describing the activity of a subject. “That person over there is narrativizing,” we might say, though likely we wouldn’t say that very often! If we did utter such an odd sentence, however, the meaning would be that the person over there is not simply *telling* a story but *making* one—perhaps making one *up* out of thin air or out of whole cloth (both fairly odd idioms), but perhaps making a story *from* or *on the basis of* things that are not, in and of themselves, narratives but something else altogether: unconnected fragments, random observations, data points of one sort or another. The “narrativizer” in question would be taking those odds and ends and then stringing them together in some fashion so as to *construct a story*. Indeed, according to some narratologists—scholars who study story professionally—narrative can be distinguished from “mere event description” by the fact that narrative involves at least two events, “neither of which logically presupposes or entails the other.”⁶ The connection between the two (or more) events, that is, is constructed by the one who is “narrativizing.”

At this point, we may turn to the question prompting the present article: Do the psalms tell stories?

The short answer to that question simply must be *negative*: no, the psalms do not tell stories because, according to many smart people, the psalms are lyric poems that are, by definition, *non-narrative* texts.⁷ But more needs to be said for a longer answer to the question and for at least two reasons. First, a good number of smart people have asserted the exact opposite—namely, that the psalms *do* tell stories (at least of a sort); curiously enough, this second group of people includes a few

“expression” or “how” of a narrative. See Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 21. For a fuller treatment, see Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), esp. 5. Bal’s definition of almost every communicative act as “narrative” is surely too expansive.

³ See Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

⁴ Cf. John D. Niles, *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

⁵ Lisa Cron, *Story or Die: How to Use Brain Science to Engage, Persuade, and Change Minds in Business and in Life* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2021).

⁶ Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, 58.

⁷ See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 29, 64, 73 (but see further below); Rebecca W. Poe Hays, *The Function of Story in the Hebrew Psalter* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021), 2–4, 146–47; and F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

members who have said that the psalms *don't* tell stories.⁸ Second, the distinction between *narrative* and *narrativizing* is a crucial one. Simply put, people *can* and often *do* narrativize the psalms. Whenever they do so—at exactly that moment and in that specific process—what is non-narrative poetry suddenly *does* (come to) tell a story. In my judgment, that is exactly what the second group of smart people are often doing: they are not so much identifying an intrinsic narrative quality within the psalms themselves but, rather, “making a story” out of something that intrinsically *isn't* a story at all.⁹ Now, when people narrativize psalms, they haven't committed any crime—quite to the contrary, some people would defend such a move as perfectly legitimate; at the same time, what people do when narrativizing the psalms is not at all the same thing as *proving* that the psalms *themselves actually* tell a story. To repeat: *narrativizing*, an action word, is not the same as *narrative*, a noun.

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FROM POETIC LINE TO PSALMIC “HISTORY”

The people who have narrativized the psalms have done it in different ways and with reference to different elements present within the Psalter. Since these people are typically both smart and thoughtful, I intend what follows to be a respectful disagreement. Limitations of space prevent me from disagreeing as fully or as respectfully as I might. I must be brief in my coverage of prior “psalmic narrativizations,” moving from the smallest to the largest of psalmic “storifications” to see if these tell a true yarn or if, in the end, all of that is simply too tall a tale.

Lineation and Parallelism

In his classic work on biblical poetry, Robert Alter argues that, despite the fact that Hebrew poetry mostly eschews narrative, there is still something of a “narrative impulse” that “often resurfaces in . . . more minute articulations, from verset to verset within the line and from one line to the next.”¹⁰ Alter is speaking here of the relationship of poetic half-lines (his “versets,” sometimes called cola [singular: colon]), often referred to as “parallelism,” or between two different lines (verses,

⁸ Esp. Alter and Poe Hays. See previous note and further below.

⁹ This seems to be the force of Jean Louis Ska's definition of story, which makes it entirely a matter of readerly (re)construction. See Ska, “Our Fathers Have Told Us”: *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2000), 5–6.

¹⁰ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 31.

whether bicola or tricola) in the larger flow of a poem. Parallelism—its meaning and mechanics, its import or lack thereof—is too large a topic to engage here. It must suffice to note that Alter recognizes that the types of relationships evident between poetic lines vary: there is focusing, heightening, concretization, development of meaning—more generally, *dynamism* or *movement* of some kind, but not all of that is of a narrative sort.¹¹ Indeed, only some poetic lines manifest what Alter calls “a consequentiality of images and ideas.” Even then, the relationship of the lines is, at best, (only) “incipiently narrative” as it often includes (only) “brief sequences of explicit narrative development.”¹²

Alter offers no precise statistics but “cautiously” suggests that two-thirds of the Bible’s poetic lines manifest the kind of dynamic movement or semantic repetition that most people refer to by means of the term *parallelism*. Within this two-thirds, Alter believes there are “two fundamental kinds of structure”: intensification and consequentiality.¹³ Once again, Alter offers no precise numbers, but it is clear from his subsequent discussion that consequentiality is the less frequently attested structure.

Frequently attested or not, is Alter’s surmise that parallel lines are occasionally narratival in some way correct? Much depends here on the definition of narrative, as well as on how many (and which) features a literary text needs for it to count as a story.¹⁴ Consider, for example, a verse Alter deems consequential and thus incipiently narratival:

Foreigners withered away,
came trembling from their enclosures. (2 Sam 22:46 // Ps 18:45
[Heb 46])¹⁵

The hallmarks of narrativity that Alter frequently speaks of—things like logical relationship or cause and effect—don’t seem operative here. How do the foreigners *first* wither away and *only then* come out trembling? This seems rather *illogical* and a precise inversion (non-chronological?) of cause → effect. But perhaps the problem here is one of translation: directionality (“away”) is not really inherent to the first verb ($\sqrt{n-b-l}$), and movement (“come trembling”) within the second verb, too, must be implied,¹⁶ though the prefixed preposition *min-* (“from”) is certainly present on the suffixed noun “their enclosures” (*mimmisgērôtām*). Other translations may be better than Alter’s in showcasing the consequentiality he posits here:

Foreigners lost heart
and came trembling out of their strongholds. (NRSVue)

¹¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 31.

¹² Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 32, 43.

¹³ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 31.

¹⁴ See Poe Hays, *Function of Story*, 2–3, 11–31, for the importance of careful definition at this point.

¹⁵ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 35.

¹⁶ 2 Sam 22:46 reads $\sqrt{h-g-r}$, “to gird” which problematizes Alter’s reading further; he is apparently reading a different verb ($\sqrt{h-r-g}$) with Psalm 18:45 (Heb. 46), but the meaning of that verb is also far from clear. Alter is aware of the difficulties. See his *The Hebrew Bible* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 2:413; 3:59.

Aliens have lost courage

And come trembling out of their fastnesses. (NJPSV)

Foreigners lose their nerve;

they come trembling out of their fortresses. (CEB)

It is easier in these translations to trace some sort of movement, though that is not necessarily one of consequentiality. Why, in the first line, if the foreigners are truly frightened, do they evacuate their “strongholds” (*misgērôt*) in the second line? One might respond with: “because resistance is useless!” which is perfectly logical but hardly necessary. People who are scared and hunkered down might just as well be expected to shelter in place, rather than abandon their places of safety. Is there really a narrative here, then—particularly one of cause → effect—or has a reader, whether Alter or someone else, *created* such a narrative explanation?¹⁷ At this point one must be very careful of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy: just because Y follows X doesn’t mean that X caused Y.¹⁸ Any causation that is found in the case of 2 Samuel 22:46 may well be *reader-created*. The narrative impulse that Alter speaks of may, at least in some cases, be in the mind of the reader of Hebrew poetry, not within the Hebrew poets themselves.

It seems possible, therefore, that some—perhaps many—instances of consequentiality are nothing of the sort, even if the lines manifest some sort of (for now indeterminate) movement or dynamism. Yet even a generous construal along the lines of Alter’s must recognize that any and all consequentiality, if and when present, is exceedingly minimalistic. The incremental—dare one say infinitesimal?—movement between half-lines or between verses rarely rises to the level that most grammars of narrative would require since it lacks any number of important features like a narrator, a narrate, at least two events, complicating action(s), evaluation(s), resolution(s), and so on and so forth.¹⁹

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¹⁷ Indeed, per Ska’s definition (see note 9 above), any “story” in this verse would be *entirely* the creation of the reader.

¹⁸ Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, 78.

¹⁹ Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, 58–61.

“small-scale narrative[s]”²⁰ are typically subsumed within a larger whole that is not narratival. It is altogether common for non-narrative, lyric poetry to include these types of “mini-narratives” (if that is what they are) without thereby transmogrifying into narrative verse.²¹

The Historical Psalms

I will return to these inset “mini-narratives” momentarily (see the section about Psalm 30 below), but first let us move from micro to macro—from line to complete poem—to consider the so-called “historical psalms.” Since these psalms are famous for their recounting of Israel’s history, readers might be forgiven if they assume these poems tell stories. Aren’t these psalms—Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136, to be precise—examples of the category of epic or narrative poetry? Though few in number—only five out of 150 psalms—it seems safe to say that these poems, if none other, tell their readers stories. Even a reduced corpus of five psalms would be enough, it would seem, to answer the question posed in the title of this article positively: yes, at least in these poems the psalms *do* tell stories.

Not so fast, according to Robert Alter. As he rightly points out,

Perhaps the greatest peculiarity of biblical poetry among the literatures of the ancient Mediterranean world is its seeming avoidance of narrative. The Hebrew writers used verse . . . only marginally and minimally to tell a tale. . . . [S]upposedly “epic” elements like the historical psalms . . . are actually exceptions that confirm the rule, for they turn out to be versified summaries or catechistic rehearsals of Israelite history, with no narrative *realization* of the events invoked, their intelligibility dependent on the audience’s detailed knowledge of the events. Even the rare biblical poems that have explicit narrative segments, such as the Song of the Sea and the Song of Deborah, are not, strictly speaking, narrative poems, because they lack the defining feature of independent narrative—exposition—and instead respond to an event or set of events presumably already known to the audience through other means.²²

While some have posited that this avoidance of narrative verse was religiously motivated (Israel distancing itself from neighboring cultures), Alter posits another reason: prose proved more supple and subtle for the sake of “a more nuanced and purposefully ambiguous representation of human character.”²³ Whatever the case, there can be no doubt that Psalm 136’s repeated (and decidedly *trans-temporal*)

²⁰ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 43; cf. 73.

²¹ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 8, 36–37, 275–95.

²² Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 29–30 (his emphasis); cf. 52. Not all ancient Near Eastern poetry was narratival. See, e.g., John L. Foster, *Hymns, Prayers, and Songs: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Lyric Poetry* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995).

²³ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 30; cf. 58.

refrain “for God’s steadfast love endures forever” punctuates, if not interrupts, the “story” (if it is that) found (!) in its other, non-refrain lines. There is also no doubt that Psalm 136’s presentation is different, despite overlapping content, from its next-door neighbor, Psalm 135, and that these two, in turn, differ from their confreres: Psalms 78, 105, and 106. Indeed, there is enough variation among these poems to wonder if the category of “historical psalms” should be properly limited to these five. After all, many psalms mention items known elsewhere from Israel’s story, and do so in still different ways (see, e.g., Psalm 114). This is at least part of Alter’s *contra*-narrative-poetry point: the prior knowledge from other places that informs and fills out the historical psalms (or other “historical” references) is actually proof that these poems are something *other than* narrative verse.²⁴ According to the noted literary critic Jonathan Culler, lyric poetry is manifested in part by its disruption of “narrative, invocation, or address,” which “makes the poem an event in the lyric present rather than the representation of a past event.”²⁵ This kind of interruption is on display in various ways in the historical psalms—Psalm 136’s refrain is an obvious case in point²⁶—but such disruption is also found elsewhere in the Psalter. A particularly instructive example is Psalm 30.

AN EXAMPLE: INSET NARRATIVE(S) IN PSALM 30 (AND BEYOND)?

Psalm 30 has been identified by several scholars as containing an inset story (or two).²⁷ At the level of lineation, Alter believes this psalm is “the most consecutively narrative” of any he analyzes.²⁸ He finds “a good deal of narrative movement” in verses 5–8 with “semantic parallelism at two or three points entirely abandoned to follow the curve of narrated events.”²⁹ He goes so far as to speak of an “expanded summary of the story,” which is found in verses 2–3 and which “includes a new and essential moment of the plot: the crying out before the healing.”³⁰ In this way, Alter exposes what he thinks is “a submerged logical link between the summarizing account of the effect of prayer in [verses] 2–3 and the exhortation to sing and praise in [verse] 4.”³¹ In her helpful work on the function of story in the Hebrew Psalter, Rebecca Poe Hays concurs, asserting that “stories (in the technical sense) are indeed present in the psalm.”³² In contrast to many other approaches, which leave

²⁴ See Brent A. Strawn, “*Ut pictura poesis*: The Historical Psalms and the Reliefs from Ashurnasirpal II’s Throneroom in the Northwest Palace at Nimrud,” in *Architecture, Iconography, and Text: New Studies on the Northwest Palace Reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II*, ed. J. Caleb Howard (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2023), 139–87.

²⁵ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 8.

²⁶ See further Strawn, “*Ut pictura poesis*,” for narrative disruptions outside Psalm 136.

²⁷ In addition to Alter and Poe Hays, see Joshua T. James, *The Storied Ethics of the Thanksgiving Psalms*, LHBOTS 658 (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 23–27.

²⁸ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 168.

²⁹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 168.

³⁰ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 168.

³¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 168; cf. Poe Hays, *Function of Story*, 83. Unlike other places in his book (see note 45 below), Alter does not put *plot* within quotation marks here.

³² Poe Hays, *Function of Story*, 84.

the definition of story woefully underdeveloped, Poe Hays appeals to certain story markers—for example, *wayyiqtol* verbal constructions and certain conjunctions “that communicate logical connections”—which she believes “clearly guide readers into accepting specific causal and chronological relationships” within Psalm 30. In my judgment, at least some of these markers are not exclusively narratival and so may well be insufficient, on their own, to make a case for narrative. Be that as it may, it seems important to observe that Poe Hays not infrequently rearranges lines in the psalms in order to clarify their narrative relationship. In the case of Psalm 30, a chronological-causal order is best seen if one reads verse 4, then verse 5, then verse 2, then verse 1. While such a rearrangement makes good sense at the level of exposition—specifically Poe Hays’s exposition—the psalm itself arranges things otherwise.

Alter and Poe Hays, *inter alia*, are clearly correct in drawing our attention to how Psalm 30 recollects the speaker’s past experiences. The key passage is verses 6–11:

As for me, I said in my prosperity,
 “I shall never be moved.”
 By your favor, O Lord,
 you had established me as a strong mountain;
 you hid your face;
 I was dismayed.
 To you, O Lord, I cried,
 and to the Lord I made supplication:
 “What profit is there in my death,
 if I go down to the Pit?
 Will the dust praise you?
 Will it tell of your faithfulness?
 Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!
 O Lord, be my helper!”
 You have turned my mourning into dancing;
 you have taken off my sackcloth
 and clothed me with joy. (Psalm 30:6–11, NRSVue)

Insofar as the Songs of Thanksgiving as a generic type tend to look back at trouble resolved, it is to be expected that they contain recollections of past experiences.³³ A formal designation as “story” requires more than just temporal framing, however; causation, too, is crucial since that is how the narrator puts events together for the sake of the narratee(s) and the larger narrative purpose(s).

For the sake of argument, let us grant that verses 6–11 do tell a story of some sort with verses 1–3 telling something related—that there is, therefore, one or more “micro-narrative” in Psalm 30. Does that mean the poem as a whole tells a story? Once again, the answer would have to be negative. The poem does not serve

³³ See Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 50–51.

primarily as description of past events with exposition; instead, as Alter observes, it foregrounds speech/language.³⁴ As one example of this, Alter draws attention to verse 4, where the psalmist addresses the congregation in a line "constructed on relatively balanced synonymity, without narrative movement or focusing, as though to underscore the thematically central assertion of song":³⁵

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.

Poe Hays, too, thinks verse 4 is properly antecedent, but it is also out of (reconstructed) chronological order. Indeed, it seems entirely naïve of or independent of much of the "storyette." Or rather, and likely better, verse 4 takes what is past and draws it into the liturgical present. God, after all, is addressed in verses 1–3, followed by the faithful community, who are addressed in verse 4, then instructed about God in verse 5, and God is once again the object of address in verses 6–12. This liturgical framing means that any bits (?) of story (?) that are present have been decidedly moved out of the realm of narrative into the lyric present. Even if Psalm 30 contains a micro-narrative or two, the poem as a whole is definitely *not* telling a story. Even at the level of line, the psalm resists—by parataxis and asyndeton—straightforward narrativity, whether chronological or causal. Consider verse 5b,

In the night, weeping lingers,
but for the morning—joy! (Ps 30:5b, my translation),

where the second verset gaps the verb of the first and moves explicably from night to morning but inexplicably from weeping to joy. Is there temporal progression here? Of a sort. Is there logical progression? Hardly. Or consider verse 7:

Lord, in your pleasure, you set me firm like a mountain
—you hid your face; I was terrified! (Ps 30:7, my translation).

Here again the second verset lacks certain conjunctions that would clarify the relationship with the first verset. In point of fact, *nothing* can explain how one goes from the first verset to the second. It is inexplicable: the disorienting, lamentable moment in the psalmist's recollection. It happens so fast that no disjunctive or temporal conjunction like "but" or "then" would suffice; equally rapid is how the hiding of the divine visage is followed by terror. But how and when that terror took place is simply not narrativized. Parataxis and asyndeton are, in other words, the opposite of story markers. If the latter is present in Psalm 30, so also is the former, and the former greatly complicates any sense that this poem tells a story. To repeat the sentiment of the epigraph above, what is happening in Psalm 30 simply "cannot be reduced to the narrating of past events; on the contrary, the narrated events

³⁴ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 167, 169.

³⁵ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 168.

seem to be subsumed by, trumped by, the present of lyric enunciation (*narrating is no longer the right word*).³⁶ If there is a narrative impulse in the Psalms, it would seem to be *ab extra*, from outside, created or imposed by readers who wish to read in such ways. Other ways are, however, perfectly possible.

To go briefly beyond Psalm 30, let me add that I believe that what I have said about this psalm can also be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about the Psalter as a whole. It is quite common these days to talk about the shape and shaping of the book of Psalms, often with extensive recourse to narrative categories. The Psalter, we have been told, tells the story of Israel, even chronologically and in order from monarchy to exile to restoration.³⁷ The problem, of course, is that the Psalter is made up of poetry that is decidedly and in the main *non*-narrative. Lyric sequencing can create the *feel* of a *kind* of story, but that is very, very different than saying that the book of Psalms *is* a story. Simply put, there is no narrative in the Psalter. There are, however, plenty of “people over there who are narrativizing.”

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CONCLUSIONS: POETIC AND OTHERWISE

Is something lost if the category of story is dropped when considering the psalms? Some would say yes. Joshua James, for instance, judges the ethical force and significance of thanksgiving psalms like Psalm 30 to be located precisely in the “ethical value of story and storytelling.”³⁸ But in point of fact, all of the values that James wants to ascribe to this type of psalm, and that he derives from story/storytelling—things like how these poems shape character, teach, and commend retelling—are not, by any stretch of the imagination, the exclusive property of narrative. Retelling of experience need not be narrational—lyric poetry is proof enough of that. Prophetic and wisdom poetry are heavily didactic, even monitory, yet mostly without being narratives. And as for character, while it is true that the field of virtue ethics is heavily enamored with narrative and that narratives can indeed shape character,³⁹ the latter is hardly a novel (!) characteristic of story.⁴⁰

³⁶ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 36 (my emphasis).

³⁷ See, *inter alia*, W. H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms as a Grammar of Faith: Prayer and Praise* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), esp. 69–90.

³⁸ James, *Storied Ethics*, 3.

³⁹ See, e.g., Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁴⁰ As James admits, a narrative ethical approach is “less methodological in nature than one may hope,” and so this approach (at best) “supplies the reader with important interpretive lenses” (*Storied Ethics*, 8). The

Poetry, too, shapes character—in some cases, or so it seems, *even more* effectively than narrative.⁴¹

There are, therefore, good reasons to resist a narrative “takeover” of a lyrical psalm as simply unnecessary. Taking a poetic approach to a poetic text yields equally positive outcomes. It also avoids certain negative ones, such as the fact that an overly-beholden-to-story approach to a non-narrative text will inevitably disappoint. To be sure, poetry, especially of the sort that contains “minimal narrative sequences”⁴²—but even poems that contain nothing of the sort⁴³—may invite us to wonder about this point or that, inciting a “desire to know the story.”⁴⁴ Such a desire “for narrative closure and completeness” is “a desire ultimately doomed to frustration: the details within the text will support any number of . . . ‘plots,’ none clearly predominant.”⁴⁵ In fact, Culler, citing Paul Allen Miller, suggests that one way to define lyric poetry is “as a collection of poems in which we seek a narrative.”⁴⁶ Said differently, that means that the desire to find a story in the psalms—to narrativize them—even when we think we have been successful, may not prove that these poems tell stories at all but may, instead, be proof of the exact opposite: that they are *not* narratives.

There is yet another and far more devastating outcome facing narrativational approaches to psalmic poetry—namely, that such approaches can minimize or altogether miss the elements of poetry that are characteristic of it, especially in dense concatenation—things like rhythm and refrain, image and metaphor, episodocity and intertextuality⁴⁷—all of the things, in other words, that the Psalter contains and wants us to have. And this does not yet mention the power of lyric poetry to *be* an event here and now, not merely to *describe* or even *explain* an event.⁴⁸ Lyrics are not simply representations of past events but are, instead, more: momentous moments of eventfulness—something akin to lyric lightning. Pursuing

point to be made is that these lenses are simply not necessary ones—or, at the very least, they are certainly not the only lenses necessary—when it comes to non-narrative materials. The idea of “creating a world,” for example (see Hauerwas and Jones, *Why Narrative?*, 145; cf. 26), is the prerogative of any number of—arguably *all*—artistic media, and so the case could be readily made that some non-narrative (and non-textual) media do that kind of work far better than story (cf. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978]).

⁴¹ See, e.g., Anne W. Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs: Wisdom Literature and the Shaping of the Moral Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Cf. Poe Hays, *Function of Story*, 87, on how first-person speech facilitates a reader’s identification with the textual voice. But this phenomenon is surely far more prevalent in the psalms than in Old Testament narrative, which is predominantly third-person.

⁴² Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 36.

⁴³ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 116–18.

⁴⁴ Culler *Theory of the Lyric*, 61.

⁴⁵ Micaela Janan, *When the Lamp Is Shattered: Desire and Narrative in Catullus* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), ix, cited in Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 61. It is instructive to note that Alter, too, often puts “plot” within scare quotation marks when speaking of poetry (*Art of Biblical Poetry*, 44, 62).

⁴⁶ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 61. Cf. Paul Allen Miller, *Lyric Texts and Lyric Consciousness: The Birth of a Genre from Archaic Greece to Augustan Rome* (London: Routledge, 1994), 55: “The lyric collection does not allow itself to be reduced to any one unnarrative, but rather generates a plurality of possible narrative explanations and temporal relations which seek to account for the poems themselves.”

⁴⁷ See Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 118–19.

⁴⁸ Culler, 36, 118.

the psalms as poetry, not as stories, is, therefore, ultimately in service to a better understanding and appreciation of these non-narrative lyric poems and how they strike, like a bolt from heaven, into the very heart of the faithful. ⊕

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