

Some Notes on Psalm 8 -- Temple Micah Psalms Study Group, 6/18/19
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(8:1) לְמַנְצֵחַ עַל-הַגִּיטִית, מְזֻמֹּר לְדָוִד For the Leader; **upon the Gittith**. A Psalm of David

HaGittit appears here, in Ps. 81:1 and Ps. 84:1 (and nowhere else, according to Strong's concordance)

Al HaGittit. According to some commentators, the Gittit is the melody that people would sing while treading grapes in the winepress (גַּת, *gat*). Others suggest that it is a musical instrument coming from the city of Gath. According to a third explanation, the Gittit is a song which was sung by the songs of Obed-Edom the Gittite (see II Samuel 6:10).

-- from *The Jerusalem Commentary to the Psalms*

Gat: Found grape-stomping music and dance from Greek, Italian, Russian, and other cultures, but nothing that struck me as especially evocative of ancient Israel or this psalm.

Gath: "Max Stern: Nebhel & Kinnor (Music for King David's Harps)," (video link in references) is music created for instruments of 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10 strings, among them a "10-stringed *gittit*" (at 20:00 mark). Program Notes, from performance by harpist Rivka Amar in Jerusalem, Dec 25, 2010: "The instruments (restored by the luthier Moshe Frumin, Haifa) are based on archaeo-logical findings on coins, statues, and seals. The movement's various titles and musical characters are inspired by headings from the Psalms. Thematic motifs are drawn from authentic ethnic Jewish-Oriental folklore. In this recording a modern harp was used." Lovely but not sure if it's exactly Psalm 8-related.

Gittite: II Sam 6:10 --

So David would not bring the Ark of the LORD to his place in the City of David; instead, David diverted it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. (11) The Ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and his whole household. (12) It was reported to King David... (1985 JPS, via Sefaria)

I don't know what was in the musical repertoire of Obed-Edom the Gittite: Does anyone?

But maybe, when "**it was reported to King David...**" Obed-Edom then sang something like this???

Ooh, I bet you're wondering how I knew...

People say "believe half of what you see, son, and none of what you hear"...

Oh, I heard it thought the grapevine (yeah, yeah, yeah)

-- "Heard it through the Grapevine," Norman Whitfield/Barrett Strong, 1967

Pamela Greenberg (*Complete Psalms*) translates *Al HaGittit* as "Upon the Wine Festival Lyre."

(8:3a) מִפִּי עוֹלָלִים, וְיִנְקִים -- יִסְדְּתָ-עֹז

Koren Translation: Out of the mouth of infants and babes You have given proof of Your **power**
Jerusalem Commentary: ...You have founded a song of **praise**

The word עֹז, 'oz, which usually means strength, sometimes denotes a song of praise and honor (see Psalm 68:35 ("Give God a melody") [לְאֱלֹהִים, לְנוּ עֹז, t'nu oz, l'elohim]). The meaning here is: The babble of sounds that come out of the mouths of children is a fixed and perpetual song of praise in honor of the Creator. Having already said that the praise of God is sung in the heaven, the psalmist now adds that even tender infants praise the Lord with their incomprehensible babble or, in other words, the babble of children is yet another of the great wonders of creation.

-- *The Jerusalem Commentary*

Note: עֹז as both "song" and "strength" is one basis of Rabbi Shefa Gold's practice, linked with the tune Temple Micah often uses for "*ozi v'zimrat YAH*" in Ps. 118. (link in references)

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(8:3b) לְמַעַן צוֹרְרֶיךָ לְהַשְׁבִּית אֹיֵב, וּמִתְנַקֵּם

Koren: because of Your **foes** [*tzor'reikha*], to silence the **enemy** [*oiyeiv*] and the avenger
Jerusalem Commentary: against Your **adversaries**, to put an end to the **enemy** and avenger

We often ignore the grandeur of the world around us. We hardly notice nature's marvelous beauty.
We have lost the capacity to wonder.

We have thus alienated ourselves from God the Creator, from Him who perpetually reveals Himself to us through His world.

When our blindness to nature's wonders is occasionally pierced by the sudden perception of an especially impressive phenomenon, we catch a glimpse of the Almighty in action. We then draw closer to Him.

When we persist in that blindness, we distance ourselves from Him, denying ourselves the possibility of a relationship with Him.

-- *Koren Tehillim* commentary

Many commentators understand that the adversaries and the enemies mentioned in our psalm are people who deny God, and the psalmist is arguing that the wonders that are plainly visible to anybody who observes the heavens, the earth, and infant behavior testify to the existence of God, the creator of the Universe.

-- *The Jerusalem Commentary*

Greenberg translates in a way that seems to incorporate elements of both views: She opens and closes the Psalm with "how vast is your signature all over the earth" and translates 8:3b, "to oppose those who oppose you, to bring the enemy and person of vengeance to a halt."

QUESTIONS:

- 1) Are we God's "enemies," as *Koren Tehillim* suggests, when we "ignore the grandeur of the world around us"? or otherwise deny the possibility of relationship with God?
- 2) Does Creation work, as the traditional view in *The Jerusalem Commentary* describes it, to "testify to the existence of God"?
- 3) Does Greenberg's formulation give more room for non- or differently believing readers to
 - 3A) experience the Psalm as describing moments of awe and the possibilities they hold?
 - 3B) relate to the stewardship (more on this below) aspect of the psalm?

LITURGY NOTE: Ps. 8 and/or related poetic lines are included in Ashkenazi Yom Kippur Musaf service. Also "on the eve of Rosh Hodesh (called 'the minor Yom Kippur prayers'), because of mention of the moon in verse 4." Sephardic tradition includes verse 4 for "Sanctification of the moon," and Yemenite and some Sephardi recite Ps. 8 "every night after the Evening Service, because of the mention of the stars in verse 4. -- from *The Jerusalem Commentary*, p.44

Ps. 8 appears in various spots in Reform prayerbooks: Psalm for Friday in *On the Doorposts of Your House* (CCAR 1996), e.g., and in Friday night service in *Mishkan T'filah* (CCAR 2007). See p.8 here.

(8:5-6) וַתַּחַסְרֵהוּ מֵעַט מֵאֱלֹהִים [What is man....] that You have made him little less **than divine**

Leaving "man" aside for now, many commentators note that "*elohim*" has several regular meanings:

- the more generic of God's names (vs. more specific YHVH), with plural as sign of respect;
- "gods," with lower case "g," with the very plurality a signal of dis-respect;
- judges;
- angels;
- 'heavenly beings' or 'beings that are like God' or some such formulation

Some midrash begins with reading "angels," some "like God." Some midrashim read all humankind as "little less than *elohim* [however translated]," while others focus on the character of Moses as in his own category, more God-like than the run-of-the-mill human or, as in this example, other prophets:

"There hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses" (Deut. 34:10). It is taught: All the prophets looked into a glass that was dim, as is said, "By the ministry of the prophets I appear dimly" (Hos. 12:11).* But Moses our teacher looked through a glass that was translucent, for of him it is said, "The similitude of the Lord doth he behold" (Num. 12:8).**

Fifty gates of understanding were created in the world, and at Sinai all but one were opened to Moses, of whom it is said, "Thou hast made him but little lower than God" (Ps. 8:6).

* They imagined they saw the deity but in fact did not. Rashi

**Moses saw a similitude, but he knew that no mortal eye could see God Himself.

-- Bialik & Ravnitsky, 100:127 (Citations are Page:Entry) Sources: B. Yev 49b, Ned 38a.

When "made him little less than *elohim*," is understood as applying to humans generally (rather than Moses or any specific "him"), commentary sometimes includes the responses -- anger, concern, shock -- on the part of angels. This device serves to highlight both the divine element in humanity and the awesome responsibility of stewardship, both as outlined in this psalm.

The same device is used to highlight why the Torah belongs to humans and not to angels:

When the generation of the flood arose and gave themselves over to lewd idolatry, the Holy One was grieved. Two angels, Shamhazai and Azzael, rose up and said: Master of the universe, did we not say to You when You created Your world, "What is man that Thou art mindful of him" (Ps. 8:5)?

God asked: But [if I destroy mankind], what is to become of the world?

They replied: Master of the universe, we will make use of it.

He said: It is revealed and known to Me that, if you lived in the world, the impulse to evil would gain mastery over you, and you would be more obdurate than the children of men.

They replied: Nevertheless, give us permission to dwell among mortal creatures, and You will see how we hallow Your Name.

Then God said: Go down and dwell among them. They immediately misbehaved with the daughters of men, who were so beautiful the angels could not conquer their impulse.

-- Bialik & Ravnitsky, 26:113 [line breaks added for ease of reading]

B. Shabbat 88b-89a relates how, on Sinai, the angels complain, quoting Ps. 8:5, about God's plan to give Yisrael the Torah. God tells Moses to argue with them. So Moses asks the angels: Were you captive in Egypt? Are you tempted to worship idols? Do you have fathers and mothers to honor? Business dealings to keep honest? The angels concede his points, and God agrees that the Torah should be delivered into the hands of humans. -- V. Spatz paraphrase

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(8:5) מַה־אֲנוֹשׁ כִּי־תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ וּבְרֹאֲדָם כִּי תִפְקְדֶנּוּ

what is **man** that You have been mindful of him, **mortal man** that You have taken note of him (JPS '85)

אֲנוֹשׁ -- **Enosh**. "found only in the poetic sections of the Bible, where it often parallels the expression בְּרֹאֲדָם, *ben adam*, 'the son of man.'" -- *The Jerusalem Commentary*

Generally, "mortal" or "human." Enosh was son of Seth, so grandson to Adam and Eve. Related to Aramaic, "*enosha* [manly]."

בְּרֹאֲדָם -- **Ben adam**. Generally, also used to mean "mortal man" or "human being."

Note on **this term**, in case it comes up in reading Christian scholarship or just in conversation: *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* notes that "Son of Man" was "apparently Jesus' self-designation (e.g., Mk 2:10, 28)." Where Jewish commentary sees Moses, or humans beings in general, as "little less than divine," some Christian readings cite Ps. 8:5-6 as a prophetic reference to Jesus, and this verse becomes part of later Christian Scripture involving divine authority (I Corinthians 15:27, Ephesians 1:22, e.g.).

--- Further note on *ben adam* and Christian reading of Psalm 8 ---

In an attempt to get some sense of how important this line of interpretation is to Christians, I used the scientific method of polling friends on Facebook:

Friends of Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Quaker backgrounds tell me Psalm 8 is generally read as

- A) speaking of an intimate relationship between God and mortal beings, as in the worship song, "Who am I that You are mindful of me?"
- B) speaking of stewardship and the Great Chain of Being, with humans having an animal and a spiritual nature, "above" sea creatures and such and "below" angels.

A Catholic source adds that Ps. 8:5-6 is "eminently fulfilled in the God-man Jesus Christ." This same friend shared the song, "Majestic is His Name," which includes "Prince of Peace" as well as the more ambiguous "O Lord," in that majestic name.

No one cited Psalm 8 as a proof text for the divinity of Jesus.

----- Note on Christian Sources: It is tricky, this shared-text territory -----

Previously, I've steered away from non-Jewish sources for these group notes

- to limit non-Jewish agenda in scholarship and teaching, **and**
- to prevent misrepresentation of other faith perspectives.

For Psalm 1, and again for Psalm 8, I share material from Shiyr Poets. They are non-Jews who identify their project as grappling directly with psalms as text and, as far as I can tell, do not add specifically Christian content to their musical renditions. For Psalm 1, I shared musical background of "I/We Shall Not Be Moved," considering it political or civic history, rather than cross-faith bible study. However, I have not offered Christian sources for direct commentary on the text....

Until now. This month, for a slightly wider view, the following pages include

- Marilynne Robinson, for its beauty of language and insight;
- *Planted Like a Tree*, for its clarity; and
- two poems -- from 1540ish England and 1970s US -- for historical perspective.

More on "What is Man?" (and God's fingers)

Marilynne Robinson, "Psalm Eight"

There is a wonderful implication that the moon and the innumerable stars are astonishing not for the vastnesses they fill so sparsely and illuminate so slightly, but because God should delight in making anything so small and fine as the heavens and their adornments, in every way exceeding them as he does...

The strategy of the Psalmist is to close the infinite distance between God and humankind by confounding all notions of scale. If the great heavens are the work of God's fingers, what is small and mortal man? The poem answers its own question this way: Man is crowned with honor and glory. He is in a singular sense what God has made him, because of the dignity God has conferred upon him, splendor of a higher order, like that of angels.... "What is man?" is asked in awe -- that God should be intrigued and enchanted by him, or loyal to him. Any sufficient answer would go some way toward answering "What is God?" -- *The Death of Adam*, p.240-241

Marilynne Robinson (b. 1943), fiction and non-fiction author, taught 25 years at the Writers' Workshop at the Univ. of Iowa. She was not faculty of a Christian institution, a spokesperson for a faith community, or generally identified as a "Christian scholar." But Christian faith permeates her work and thought. (This essay on Psalm 8 centers around Resurrection narratives in Christian Scripture.)

On "Stature" in Psalm 8: excerpts from *Like a Tree Planted: An Exploration of Psalms and Parables through Metaphor*. Green, Barbara, OP. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997.

Barbara Green OP is Prof. of Biblical Studies at the Graduate Theological Union. *Like a Tree Planted* pairs selected psalms with Christian parables. The intention is to recover metaphors in texts which the author believes have lost accessibility and power to many readers. The chapter called "Stature" pairs Ps. 8 with Lk 15:11-32, the story of the Prodigal Son, and focuses on changes of scale and perspective.

Green begins with the psalm's overall structure:

Many psalms sprawl more sloppily than does this one. Its careful proportionings, visible in its four layers of concentricity, invite us to find ourselves in its arrangement, to see just where we fit in.

[Four layers are indicated with varied fonts and indentations; this chart >> uses Green's format with JPS 1917 translation, condensed, because direct copying was not an easy option.]
--p.40

2) **O LORD, our Lord, how glorious is Thy name in all the earth!**

whose majesty is rehearsed above the heavens.

3) Out of the mouth of babes ... still the enemy and the avenger.

4) When I behold Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers...

5) What is man...?

6) *...but little lower than the angels...crowned him with glory and honour.*

7) ...dominion over the works of Thy hands;...all things under his feet:

8) Sheep and oxen, all of them, yea, and the beasts of the field:

9) The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea...paths of the seas.

10) **O LORD, our Lord, how glorious is Thy name in all the earth!**

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Green then asks us to follow the psalm's varying perspectives:

- beginning with the vastness of God,
- then the largeness of the heavens,
- and down to baby size.

At this juncture, we are small and "straining our eyes and our necks, looking up to peer beyond God's farthest asteriate fingerwork glittering against the dark backdrop" (p.41). In verses 6-9, "we experience another dizzying shift in stature as we find ourselves regent of the cosmos," with many responsibilities:

If we are honest we know that our responsibilities to birds, land-crawlers, and fish -- the creatures that inhabit the realms above our heads and beneath our feet -- are often exercised poorly and with but partial insight...

...with such assessments ringing in our ears -- little people scarcely able to see the stars, struggling for speech, but mad regent of the realm in which we dwell, flattered at the charge but humbled at its implications -- we revisit the center of the psalm...How do we see ourselves and how do we eye each other in view of God's persistent concern for us?" -- p.42

From the center of the psalm, we learn "that our size is given, not scraped together by our hands" (p.42):

Our simultaneously greatness and littleness, our paradoxically weak and powerful selves are the insight we are given here. We are interconnected with all that is, not sovereign but responsible.
-- *Like a Tree Planted*, p.43

"What is Man?" in Different Ages

"Psalm 8," by Henry Howard Surrey (1516-1547), from *The Poets Book of Psalms*, an English anthology from authors of the 16th through 20th centuries, of all 150 psalms:

...But yet among all these I ask, "What thing is man?"
Whose turn to serve in his poor need this work thou first began?
Or what is Adam's son that bears his father's mark
For whose delight and comfort eke thou has wrought all this work
I see thou mindest him much, that thou dost reward him so:
Being but earth, to rule the earth, whereon himself doth go
For angel's substance eke thou madest him differ small;
Save one doth change his life awhile the other, not at all.

Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) are noted as important in the development of the English sonnet. Both were entangled in the court of Henry VIII, and Surrey was eventually beheaded for treason. His "Psalm 8" appears in Don't know what this means, but Wieder says of Surrey:

Courtier, favorite, and poet an avatar of Sir Philip Sidney.* This smoother and polisher of the English sonnet also paraphrased the book of Ecclesiastes in verse. His Psalms done into meter cross the English ballad with a verse form that resembles *Piers Ploughman*.**
-- p.xx, *The Poets Book of Psalms*. Laurance Wieder, ed. (San Francisco: Harper 1991)

*Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), and his sister Mary, created a poetic translation of the psalms, long used in manuscript form and influential on other poets (but not published in quantity until 1963).

** Piers Ploughman is a late 14th Century poetic theological work.

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"Who Are We, That You Take Note of Us?/Psalm 8" from Daniel Berrigan's 1978 *Uncommon Prayer*

Through all the universe
how glorious is your name!

I raise eyes
to the lofty tent of the heavens
sun stars moon
 foil of your right hand

I see rejoicing
beast and dolphin
eagle, cormorant, condor
triumphant plowing the seas
in the plangent air godlike

I bend to the faces of children
they lisp your name

And I ponder,
mere mortals, who are we
that you
take note of us,
have care of us?

fragile, fallible
vermicular, puny --
crowned now, sceptred now
conscious now, exultant now!

Through all the universe
how glorious is your name!

Berrigan offers interpretations, not translation; commentary (very much of its time) follows each poem:

Hand in hand with the degradation of the universe goes the degradation of humans.

Who hasn't seen it? Impossible to destroy the one without losing the other. The community is the universe, grown conscious, its tightest, most fragile center. The community; its roots, outreach, self-understanding, song, art, voice in the world -- once broken, bowdlerized, defamed, forbidden -- how quickly everything else in the world (including the world itself) goes down the drain. -- p.5

A song to the glory of God implies that we betray his Name, his Glory, to no idol. Least of all to this one, the god of death. -- p.6

-- *Uncommon Prayer: A Book of Psalms*. (NY: The Seabury Press, 1978.)

Berrigan (1921 - 2016) was a Catholic priest, anti-war and environmental activist, and poet.

For clarity: It was Philip Berrigan (1923–2002) who was in prison and was excommunicated. Daniel's brother, Philip, was also a peace activist; he, too, was a Jesuit priest, until he married former nun Elizabeth McAlister (b. 1939) and they were both excommunicated in 1973.

In 1965, Daniel Berrigan, Rev. Richard John Neuhaus (1939-2009) and R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-72) together formed Clergy and Laity Concerned (about the War in Vietnam), later joined by MLK and others. Heschel and the Berrigans remained close.

Mishkan T'filah (in Shabbat Evening I: Amidah)

When we behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and stars that You set in place --

What are we humans that You are mindful of us?

We mortals that You take note of us?

You made us little less than divine,

adorned us with glory and majesty.

You gave us dominion over Your handiwork,

laying the world at our feet...

how majestic is Your name throughout the earth.

-- alternative reading for "*Modim*" ("...for Your miracles that we experience every day..."), p.177

The reading includes verses 8:4-7 and 10, omitting:

- the superscription and the "how majestic...!" exclamation (repeated in verses 10);
- "Out of the mouths of babes...adversaries...avenger," of verse 3; and
- sheep, oxen, beasts of the field, fowl of the air, fish of the sea, and "whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas," of verses 8 and 9.

"Majestic (Psalm 8)" by the ShiyR Poets (Brian Doerksen, Calum Rees, Teresa Trask & Brian Thiessen)

This song, unlike other ShiyR Poets' pieces that I've heard, includes a children's choir as backup singers

O Lord our Lord

How majestic is your name in all the earth

O Lord our Lord

You have set your glory higher than the heavens

Through your children's purest praise

You establish strength against your foes

To silence all your enemies; every avenger

When I consider your heavens

When I consider the work of your hands

The moon and the stars

Which You have set in place

What is man that you are mindful

Humankind that you care

Who are we that you consider us

You made us a little less than the gods

And clothed us with glory and grandeur

You make them rule

(When I consider the heavens)

Over the work of your hands

(When I consider the heavens)

Everything under their feet

(When I consider the heavens)

Beasts of the field

Flocks of the air

Fish in the sea

O Lord our Lord

How majestic is your name in all the earth

O Lord our Lord

You have set your glory higher than the heavens

Higher than the heavens

[repeating introduction from April handout, taken from ShiyR Poets website] The Netherland-based ShiyR Poets -- Brian Doerksen, Calum Rees, Teresa Trask and Brian Thiessen -- worked together for years to "render the Psalms as sung English poetry." They report using "all the translations available (including Robert Alter's more poetic translation) and seeking counsel from Hebrew scholars." They write:

Choosing not to censor the difficult verses of lament and anger, the SHIYR Poets render each psalm in its entirety, singing in solidarity with all who suffer....Taken as a whole, the Psalms are perhaps the most emotionally healthy comprehensive expression of spirituality ever written. These are songs of desire and desperation...songs that demand justice for the oppressed...songs that honour the innocent praise of children...songs about everyday things like sleep.

Hamlet Act 2, Scene 2

Guildenstern:

My lord, we were sent for.

Hamlet:

I will tell you why. So shall my anticipation prevent your discovery, and your secrecy to the King and Queen molt no feather. I have of late---but wherefore I know not---lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercises, and, indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the Earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air---look you, this brave, o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof, fretted with golden fire---why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is a man: how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties; in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god---the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me---not women neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

Text dating note from Folger Shakespeare Library:

The textual history of *Hamlet* is complicated. The play was first published in a quarto in 1603 (Q1) that differs in significant ways from subsequent editions....Most modern editions of the play are based on the texts of the Second Quarto (Q2), published in 1604, and the First Folio (F1), published in 1623. -- <http://www.folger.edu/hamlet>

References

Music

"Heard it through the Grapevine" by Norman Whitfield/Barrett Strong
<http://bit.ly/RecordGaye> ['67 recording], <http://bit.ly/AcapellaGaye> [performance vocals isolated from orchestra]

"Max Stern: Nebhel & Kinnor (Music for King David's Harps)," music created for reconstructions of ancient instruments -- <http://bit.ly/DavidHarps> -- music for 10-stringed *gittit*, found at mark 20:00

"Majestic (Psalm 8)." Shiyr Poets. <http://bit.ly/shiyr8>

"*ozi v'zimrat YAH*" (from Ps. 118) Rabbi Shefa Gold's chant and teaching
<http://www.rabbishefagold.com/ozi-vzimrat-yah/>

Text

Koren Tehillim -- see Weinreb

The Jerusalem Commentary to the Psalms -- see Hahkam

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Greenberg is a poet, writer, and former rabbinical student with an M.A. in Jewish Studies. There is a reading guide and a video interview with the author on the Bloomsbury site.

Hakham, Amos. *The Jerusalem Commentary to the Psalms*. (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2003)

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from Levine's Vanderbilt bio: University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies....A self-described Yankee Jewish feminist, Professor Levine is a member of Congregation Sherith Israel, an Orthodox Synagogue in Nashville, although she is often quite unorthodox.

from Brettler's homepage: I am Dora Golding Professor of Biblical Studies and former chair of the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University. My main areas of research are religious metaphors and the Bible, biblical historical texts, and women and the Bible.

Also note: Brettler is currently on Sabbatical in Israel, writing a book on the psalms.

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Wieder, Laurance, ed. *The Poets Book of Psalms*. San Francisco: Harper 1991