

# Grant Many Visions!

## The Psalter as Prophetic Torah

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I concluded my previous article in *Conservative Judaism* by asking what the Torah might have looked like had it been given its final frame and spiritual orientation by the prophets of ancient Israel rather than by the priests. I would like to take that idea forward here and suggest that the Book of Psalms was intended by its final editors to serve as the prophetic counterpart to the priestly Torah.

There are a number of Biblical texts that distinguish between three groups of spiritual leaders in ancient Israel. Micah, for example, lists them so he can damn them serially: Her (i.e. Judah's) rulers render judgment for a bribe, her priests teach Torah for a fee and her prophets divine for silver. Yet they rely on the Lord, saying "The Lord is in our midst; no evil shall befall us (Micah 3:11.)" In Jeremiah's day, the hierarchal set-up was still quite the same and the prophet was still not impressed: "The priests never asked themselves, "Where is the Lord?" / The guardians of the Torah (Hebrew: *tofsei hattorah*) do not know Me / and the shepherds have sinned against Me (Jeremiah 2:8.)" <sup>1</sup> And just shortly before the final debacle, Ezekiel saw the same structure: "They shall request a vision from the prophet / but Torah shall vanish from the priest / and counsel from the elders (Ezekiel 7:26.)"

What was the fate of these groups in the post-exilic period? The royal question is as easy to answer as the priestly one: whatever precisely Zerubbabel's pedigree may have been, the Davidic monarchy was not re-established after the exile, but large numbers of priests returned in full force to lay claim to their former position of authority in the Second Temple.<sup>2</sup> What then of the prophetic caste? True, they are

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<sup>2</sup> The question of whether Zerubbabel was actually a Davidic scion who somehow failed to establish himself as a post-exilic king is an obscure one. He is mentioned in I Chronicles 3:17-19 as the grandson of King Jehoiachin, but his father's name there is given as Pedaiah. Shealtiel, whose name is given as Zerubbabel's father's at Ezra 3:2 and 8, 5:2 and Nehemiah 12:1, is listed there as a different son of the king's, i.e. as Zerubbabel's uncle. Whatever, the point is that although he is spoken of widely as one of the two leaders of the post-exilic community (along with Jeshua ben Jehozadak, the high priest), it seems

mentioned as a specific group that went into exile neither in the account of the first wave of deportations (2 Kings 24:14-17) nor in the description of the second (2 Kings 25:11, cf. Jeremiah 52:15), but neither does it seem likely or logical to assume that they were spared deportation and left to forage for themselves among the ruins of Judah like the *dallat ha'aretz* mentioned both in the Book of Kings and in the parallel passage in Jeremiah.<sup>3</sup>

We know, of course, both Haggai and Zachariah as prophetic figures who played major roles in the years during which the Second Temple was being built and first functioning.<sup>4</sup> But what then? Were there prophetic figures functioning in Judah during the centuries that followed the dedication of the new Temple at the end of the sixth century B.C.E.? On the one hand, rabbinic tradition is fairly unequivocal about the idea that Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi were the last of the prophets.<sup>5</sup> Still, Ezra 5:1-2 makes reference to “the prophets of God” who supported Zerubbabel and Jeshua in their effort to rebuild the Temple and Nehemiah makes specific references to prophets active in his day, mentioning the prophetess Noadiah by name so as to include her especially in a passionate curse against the prophets who sought to scare him out of proceeding with his project to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup>

It is also worth noting that the various pre-exilic texts that speak about the end of prophecy nowhere state unequivocally that a rupture in the system was to be

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clear that he never ascended to the throne, although passages in both Haggai (2:23) and, especially, Zachariah suggest that he was expected, at least in some circles, to claim the throne eventually. See Zachariah 3:8 and 6:12, in neither of which verses Zerubbabel's name is specifically mentioned but cf. 4:6-7, which makes the identification at least very likely. That the priesthood was re-established is guaranteed by the general agreement among all the sources that Jeshua became the new High Priest and countless references throughout the post-exilic books to a newly reconstituted priesthood, including a long list in Nehemiah 12 of all the priests and Levites who “came up with Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua.”

<sup>3</sup> 2 Kings 25:12 and Jeremiah 52:15.

<sup>4</sup>The author of Malachi was probably also active during this period.

<sup>5</sup> The rabbinic ideas about the end of prophecy are presented in the *Tosefta* at Sotah 13:3 (ed. Lieberman, p. 231), in the *Yerushalmi* at Sotah 9:14, 24b, in the *Bavli* at Sotah 48b, Yoma 9b and Sanhedrin 11a and also at *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 8:10. The *Avot Derabbi Natan* (ch. 1, text A, ed. Schechter, p. 2) specifically identifies Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi as constituting an intermediary stage of transmission between the (other) prophets and the men of the Great Assembly, an idea that is obviously based on the notion that they were the very last of the prophets. Josephus, for his part, wrote (in *Against Apion* 1:40) that the latest of the literary prophets lived in the time of King Artaxerxes, the Persian king he identified with King Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther.

<sup>6</sup>Nehemiah 6:14. Previously, Nehemiah was almost taken in by a prophecy uttered by one Shemaiah ben Delaiah, noting that he would surely have been murdered had he not caught on in time to the fact that

necessarily permanent. The text at Amos 8:12, for example, is more admonitory than prognostic in nature in that the cessation of prophecy is being held out in them as an awful, but only potential, punishment for an unworthy people. Other texts, like Isaiah 29:10-11, suggest that prophecy may well be suspended temporarily someday, but could conceivably be restored at a later date. A number of immediately pre- and post-exilic texts suggest that a lively debate took place in their authors' day as to whether the disasters of the sixth century had occasioned or would yet occasion the cessation of prophecy earlier prophetic figures had predicted might one day occur. The post-exilic poet at Psalm 74:9, for example, says in so many words (*'ein 'od navi*) that his world is experiencing a cessation of prophecy and that he cannot say with any certainty at all when that hiatus of divine inspiration will finally end. Lamentations 2:9 is from the same epoch and says basically the same thing, but Jeremiah 18:18 indicates that there were opinions about in Jerusalem just before the destruction precisely to the contrary.

Nehemiah's reference to Noadiah and her obstructionist cohorts, at any rate, only hints at the existence of an active prophetic caste in Jerusalem during the centuries that followed the rebuilding of the Temple and I suppose that the paucity of Jewish literary texts from the fifth, fourth and third centuries B.C.E. guarantees that we will never know with any certainty whether there were or weren't prophets functioning in more or less the same way in Judahite society that their illustrious predecessors did before the destruction.

The prophets, however, were not only prognosticators. They were also proponents of a kind of religious experience that was distinct and, in its own way, quite different from the type of spirituality promulgated in the priestly circles of old Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> There are hints here and there in the Torah of the differences of religious style and spiritual content between the priests and the prophets, but the Torah, when all is said and done, is a priestly document through and through. Indeed, its bias against the prophetic experience is glaring: not only are the prophets specifically *not* to be supported with anything resembling the elaborate system of taxation designed to support the priests, but the Torah barely mentions the prophetic caste at all,

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“it was not God who sent him, but he was merely declaring a prophecy that he had been hired by Sanbalat and Tuviah (Nehemiah's main opponents) to proclaim (Nehemiah 6:12.)” Note that the ruse could only have worked in the first place if Nehemiah lived in a time and place where prophetic messages from God were received regularly.

<sup>7</sup> Cf., e.g., passages like Jeremiah 7:22, in which the prophet publicly denies that the basic rituals of priestly piety formed even a minor part of the revelation at Sinai. This is not quite the same as the thought expressed at 1 Samuel 15:22 or Psalm 51:9 to the effect that priestly ritual is only meaningful when accompanied by sincere faith.

turning to them basically only to warn Israel against prophetic apostates or false, self-appointed prophets who willfully (Hebrew: *bezadon*) utter prophecies they themselves have made up.<sup>8</sup> True, a prophet “like Moses” will appear someday to convey the true word of God to the people, but this development is assigned to the hazy future and, in any event, refers to a single individual and specifically *not* to a caste of people.<sup>9</sup> The actual prophetic caste as it functioned in ancient Israel is left unacknowledged and, at least for latter-day readers, delegitimized. Indeed, even the word *navi’* is used in the Torah in a non-technical sense to refer loosely to spokespeople (Exodus 7:1), community leaders (Exodus 15:20) or even just to the exceptionally pious (Genesis 20:7) rather than to members of the prophetic caste. And nowhere at all is there any indication of a priestly concession to the fact that the prophets were promulgating a different kind of spiritual communion with God than the priests themselves were offering.

The Chronicler—the author of the Books of Chronicles—lived sometime during the period of Persian rule over Judah and, although his book of Israelite history concludes formally with the edict of Cyrus allowing the exiles to return home to Judah, the author nonetheless allowed himself to describe pre-exilic life in a way that tends to justify the various institutions that grew up after the return to Zion.<sup>10</sup> It is my feeling that the Psalter puts forth a spiritual program derived directly from the experiences of the prophets, one that is in direct contrast (one might even say, conflict) with the program put forward in the pages of the priestly Torah. The Chronicler understood this well and sought to justify the situation by showing how the Levitical singers of his day were themselves the scions of prophetic families and thus the legitimate latter-day custodians of their particular brand of authentic ancient spirituality.

The psalms are attributed to any number of people. Seventy-three bear specific attribution to King David.<sup>11</sup> Others are attributed to other figures, some famous

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<sup>8</sup> Prophetic apostates: Deuteronomy 13:2-6. False prophets: Deuteronomy 18:20-22.

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 18:15-19.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of different attempts at dating the Chronicler's work, see D.L. Petersen, *Late Israelite Prophecy: Studies in Deutero-Prophetic Literature and Chronicles* (Missoula, 1977), pp. 56-60. On the precise date of the Chronicler, see Martin Noth, *The Chronicler's History* (trans. H.G.M. Williamson; Sheffield, 1987), pp. 69-73, Adam C. Welch, *The Work of the Chronicler: Its Purpose and Date* (London, 1939) and Peter Ackroyd, “The Age of the Chronicler,” printed in a supplement to *Colloquium: The Australian and New Zealand Theological Review* (Auckland, 1970) and now reprinted in the author's *The Chronicler in His Age* (Sheffield, 1991=*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, vol. 101), pp. 8-86.

<sup>11</sup> Psalms 3-9, 11-32, 34-41, 51-65, 68-70, 86, 101, 103, 108-110, 122, 124, 131, 133 and 138-145. Note that the Septuagint omits Davidic ascription in the cases of Psalms 122, 124, 131 and 133 and adds

personalities in their own right like Moses (Psalm 90) or King Solomon (Psalms 72 and 127), others more obscure personalities like Asaph (Psalms 50 and 73-83), Heman Ha'ezrahi (Psalm 88), Ethan Ha'ezrahi (Psalm 89), Jeduthun (Psalms 39, 62 and 77) and the otherwise unnamed sons of Korach (Psalms 42, 44-49, 84, 85, 87 and 88.)<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, all of these otherwise unknown personalities (with the exception of the sons of Korach) are identified by the Chronicler as prophetic figures, as is King David himself.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the Chronicler (at I Ch 25:1) specifically identifies Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun as men who “ prophesied to the accompaniment of lyres, harps and cymbals.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the Chronicler specifically gives the number of these three men's descendants as 288, a number possibly interpretable against the story of the seventy-two elders upon whom God poured out the spirit of prophecy in the days of Moses.<sup>15</sup>

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attribution to David to the titles of Psalms 33, 42, 45, 67, 71, 91, 93-99, 10-4 and 137. Also, I Chronicles 16 connects Psalms 96, 105, 106 and 107 with King David, although these psalms are not actually ascribed to David in the Psalter. Fourteen psalms (3, 7, 18, 30, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63 and 142) are specifically provided with references to the circumstances under which David wrote the psalm in question. The Septuagint adds these kind of references to David's life to five more poems (27, 71, 97, 143 and 144.)

<sup>12</sup> The eighty-eighth psalm is attributed both to Heman and to the sons of Korach. The psalms attributed to Jeduthun also all have double attributions, psalms 39 and 62 to David and psalm 77 to Asaph, but psalms 62 and 77 both have superscriptions that read as though Jeduthun were the name of a musical instrument rather than the name of the composer of the song. (Regarding Jeduthun, see Rashi's comment to Psalm 1:1.) The Septuagint omits the attribution of Psalm 127 to Solomon and adds attributions of Psalm 137 to Haggai and Psalms 146, 147 and 148 to Haggai and Zachariah. The rabbis attributed psalms to Adam, Abraham and Melchizedek as well at *BT* Baba Batra 14b. Rashi explains (*ad loc.*) that they were thinking of the 139th psalm with respect to Adam, to the 110th psalm with respect to Melchizedek and, in that they took Ethan to be his cognomen, the eighty-ninth psalm with respect to Abraham. Cf. the amplified parallel passage at *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 4:4.

<sup>13</sup> The Chronicler does mention the sons of Korach by name (at 1 Chronicles 9:19 and 31 and at 12:7) but there is no reference to them being composers or singers of songs and neither does the author refer to them as seers or prophets. Nonetheless, the author does slip in a reference (at 2 Chronicles 29:11) to the Levites engaging in the offering of incense, precisely the ritual act that the Torah portrays as the one that brought about the final destruction of (the original) Korach and his followers.

<sup>14</sup> Asaph is also called a prophet in the thirtieth chapter of the *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* in version published in Venice in 1598. See ed. Friedmann (Vienna, 1901), p. 150, note 14. On the general question of the Chronicler's attitude towards music and singing, see John W. Kleinig's *The Lord's Song: The Basis, Function and Significance of Choral Music in Chronicles* (Sheffield [U.K.], 1991=*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement vol. 156.)

<sup>15</sup> As noted by Raymond J. Tournay in *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms: The Prophetic Liturgy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem* (=Journal of the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, no. 118; Sheffield [U.K.]: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), p. 38. (Seventy-two times four is 288.) The story

In other passages, the Chronicler prefers the word seer (Hebrew: *hozeh*) to prophet (*navi*), describing Heman as a seer at 1 Ch 25:5, Asaph as a seer at 2 Ch 29:30 and Jeduthun specifically a seer of the king (i.e. David) at 2 Ch 35:15.<sup>16</sup> It is highly significant that, except for a brief notice in the Book of Kings to the effect that King Solomon was even wiser than Heman, none of these individuals is even mentioned in the Deuteronomic History; the Chronicler was apparently specifically interested in providing historical prophetic roles to the men to whom a significant number of the poems included in the Book of Psalms were attributed.<sup>17</sup>

The case of David himself is extremely interesting in its own right. The beginning of 1 Chronicles 25, for example, states rather clearly that it was David himself who selected the seers Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun and their numerous offspring—both male and female—to be the “trained singers (Hebrew: *melumdei shir*) for the Lord (1 Chronicles 25:7.)”<sup>18</sup>

Of course, that David should have been partial to prophetic figures is part of the larger tradition connecting David himself to prophecy. At 1 Chronicles 22:8, for example, David is portrayed as reporting a prophetic message he received from God to Solomon, then just an “untried youth.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, David is depicted just lines before this passage as a true forerunner of Elijah, whose prophetic status received divine confirmation in precisely the same way the Book of Kings, which the Chronicler

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of the seventy-two elders (that is, seventy plus Eldad and Medad) is told in the eleventh chapter of Numbers.

<sup>16</sup> See also the story told in 2 Chronicles 20:14-19 about how one Yahaziel, a member of the Asaphite clan, became a prophet in the time of King Jehoshaphat.

<sup>17</sup> The reference in 1 Kings 5:11 also mentions Ethan the Ezrahite, to whom the eighty-ninth psalm is attributed, as having been less wise than Solomon.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding women singers in the Second Temple, cf. verses 5b-6: “God gave Heman fourteen sons and three daughters, all of whom were under the charge of their father for the singing in the House of Lord, to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps and lyres, for the service of the House of God by order of the king.” The tradition that the Levitical singers were appointed to their positions by David appears again in Chronicles at 2 Chronicles 35:15.

<sup>19</sup> Hebrew: *na'ar varakh* (1 Chronicles 22:5.) Note that the Chronicler reports twice (at 1 Chronicles 22:8 and 29:3) that David said that the word of God regarding his plan to build a permanent temple in Jerusalem had come directly to him, i.e. in a prophetic state of communion with the divine, while at 1 Chronicles 17:1-10, he echoes the story preserved in 2 Samuel 7:4 to the effect that this same information was specifically said to have been conveyed to David by the prophet Nathan. Thus we see the Chronicler presenting the received tradition, the contradicting it with what we can only assume was his own opinion not once but twice.

undoubtedly knew, reported regarding Elijah.<sup>20</sup> One has the sense that if the Chronicler refrained from mimicking the psalmist's portrayal of David as being drawn from the water in the manner of the baby Moses, it was simply because he did not include any birth narrative for David in the first place.<sup>21</sup>

The Chronicler shows no special reticence about acclaiming David as a *bona fide* prophet. At 2 Chronicles 8:14, for example, he specifically calls David “a man of God (Hebrew: *'ish ha'elohim*), a term used scores of times throughout Scripture as a technical term denoting a prophet and which he himself uses twice to describe Moses.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, the author of Chronicles had firm ground to stand on in describing David as a prophet in that tradition had, even in his day, long connected David's anointing as king of Israel with the assumption of the mantle of prophecy: “Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him (i.e. David) in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came over David from that day on...(1 Samuel 16:13.)”<sup>23</sup> Even David's own “last words,” at least as recorded in 2 Samuel 23, attest to his unqualified self-conception as a prophet of Israel: “The spirit of the Lord has spoken through me / His word has been on my tongue.”<sup>24</sup> Solomon also makes the point that God spoke “with His mouth” to Solomon's father, David, i.e. that David was a prophetic figure who received the word of God directly and not via some other prophetic spokesman, at 1 Kings 8:15.<sup>25</sup> In short, we can certainly agree with the author who wrote that, for his Biblical biographers, David, at least at the end of his life, was above all a prophet.<sup>26</sup> Of

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<sup>20</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:26 and 1 Kings 18:37-38.

<sup>21</sup> The seventeenth verse of the eighteenth psalm (=2 Samuel 22:17) features a first person narrative in which the poet describes himself being drawn out of the water using the same verb as in the Moses story (at Exodus 2:10.) The eighteenth psalm is attributed to David.

<sup>22</sup> The term *'ish ha'elohim* is used to refer to Moses at Deuteronomy 33:1, Joshua 14:6, Ezra 3:2, Psalm 90:1, 1 Chronicles 23:14 and 2 Chronicles 30:16. David is also called *'ish ha'elohim* at Nehemiah 12:24.

<sup>23</sup> Why the Chronicler omitted this tradition from his own (admittedly truncated) description of David's anointing by Samuel (at 1 Chronicles 11:3), I cannot say.

<sup>24</sup> 2 Samuel 23:2. Note also the prophetic style of 2 Samuel 23:1, which may be compared easily to the opening style of two of Balaam's prophetic speeches (Numbers 24:3 and 15.)

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the reference to God speaking “mouth to mouth” with Moses at Numbers 12:18.

<sup>26</sup> A. Robert, “*La sens du mot Loi dans le Ps. cxix (vulg. cxviii)*,” *Revue Biblique* 46(1937), p. 202. Many ancient authors would have agreed with this sentiment, cf. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 6:166, the author of Luke-Acts at Acts 2:30 (“...but since [David] was a prophet...”) and 4:25 and even the author of the Qumran scroll called 11QPs-a, who wrote that “David, son of Jesse, was a wise man, a light like the light

course, this is hardly a modern idea—Saadia Gaon himself wrote that “ the entire psalter is prophecy that David prophesied.”<sup>27</sup>

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In light of the material assembled above, it seems reasonable to assert that the author of Chronicles, who lived during the Second Temple period *and* who obviously had a great deal of presumably inner knowledge of its workings procedures *and* who knew the Psalter as the hymnal of the Levitical singers of that Temple, felt it reasonable to portray the authors of the psalms, both the major and even the minor figures to whom the various poems in the Psalter are attributed, as prophetic figures because he took the Levitical Temple singers of his day as the latter-day proponents of the kind of spirituality he connected (rightly or wrongly) with the pre-exilic prophetic caste.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the Chronicler seems to have felt so certain that the Levites of his own day were the spiritual descendants of the prophets of the First Temple period, that he, either intentionally or inadvertently fixed the text of 2 Kings 23:2 (“ And the King [Hezekiah] went up to the Temple along with all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the prophets and the entire people from young to old....” ) to read (at 2 Ch 34:30) that the king went up to the Temple in the company of the priests and Levites, i.e. substituting Levites for prophets.<sup>29</sup> But to set

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of the sun...the Lord gave him an intelligent and enlightened spirit. He wrote 3600 psalms. All this he expressed under prophetic inspiration, which was given to him on the part of the most High (trans. Tournay in Raymond Jacques Tournay, *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms: The Prophetic Liturgy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem* [Sheffield (U.K.), 1991], p. 44.)

<sup>27</sup> Saadiah Gaon, First Introduction to Psalms, printed in his commentary to the Psalter, trans. and ed. Y. Kafih (Jerusalem, 1966), p. 28, cf. the comments of Uriel Simon in his *'Arba' Gishot Leseifer Tehillim Meirav Sa' adiah Ga'on 'Ad R. 'Avraham Ibn 'Ezra* (Ramat-Gan, 1982), pp. 13-54. Saadia then goes on to demonstrate why the specific attribution of various poems within the Psalter to other people does not rule out taking the entire book as the prophetic output of David. (Cf. Rashi to Psalm 72:20.) Ibn Ezra writes in his introduction to the Psalms (printed in Simon, p. 248) that he believed the entire Psalter to have been written under the influence of the Holy Spirit, i.e. as a work of prophecy rather than literary creativity. Judging from his comments to Psalm 48:10, Rashi seems to have taken the psalmists (or at least the author of the forty-eighth psalm) to be a prophet as well.

28 As noted by D.L. Petersen in *Late Israelite Poetry: Studies in Deutero-Prophetic Literature* (Missoula, 1977), p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> Regarding this passage, see Petersen, loc. cit. and also J. Myers in his Anchor Bible commentary to Chronicles, vol. 2 (Garden City, 1965), p. 208. The idea that the Levitical singers of the Second Temple period were the spiritual descendants of the prophets is also related somehow to the mysterious way the Chronicler lists the names of the sons of Heman at 1 Ch 25:4. The last nine names on the list appear to form the fragment of some forgotten psalm that could be translated to yield: “Have mercy on me, Lord, have mercy, (for) you are my God / I have glorified and magnified Your Help / Still afflicted, I spoke: Grant many visions.” The translation is tentative in part. See P. Haupt, “*Die Psalmverse in I Chr 25,4*”

forth the Chronicler's sentiments about the authors whose poems appear in the Psalter is one thing and explaining those sentiments is another. What evidence, we can therefore ask, is there within the Psalter itself that will allow us to describe that book as proffering a kind of religious experience of God as distinct and different from the kind of spirituality being offered in the Torah, the other great quinquartite classic of ancient Jewish literature, as priest is from prophet?<sup>30</sup>

We may start with the Torah itself and ask a series of simple questions. What is the point of fidelity to the covenant? What are the rewards the faithful may expect as recompense for their fidelity? Why should anyone keep the commandments? What is the precise nature of the bargain struck at Sinai?

Luckily, these are not new questions, but ones to which the Torah itself returns over and over, especially, but not exclusively, in Deuteronomy.

Of all the passages that attempt to make explicit the reward for fidelity to the commandments, the best known must be Deuteronomy 11:13-21, which the rabbis designated for liturgical recitation twice daily. There, the idea is a simple one: if the faithful Israelites do all the commandments then the rain will fall, the grass will grow and not only they, but their children as well, can expect to live long lives on the land God promised their ancestors would be theirs.

Other passages appear to be elaborations of the same basic idea. Deuteronomy 28, for example, offers a list merely longer, but not essentially different: the faithful will be blessed in every way (as will their children, their produce and their livestock) and God will grant them political, military, financial and moral superiority over their enemies.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, this is a permanent offer: even if Israel strays from its

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in the *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 34(1914), pp. 142-145 and H. Torczyner, "A Psalm by the Sons of Heman," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 68(1949), pp. 247-249, both of whom offer quite different translations and cf. D.L. Petersen, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>30</sup> Regarding the parallel structure of the Torah and the Psalter, cf. the passage from *Midrash Tehillim* 1:2, ed. Buber (Vilnius, 1891), p. 3: Moses gave the five books of the Torah (*hamishah humshei torah*) to Israel and David gave the five books of the Psalter (*hamishah sefarim shebetehillim*) to Israel. The context offers a long list of ways in which Moses and David were parallel figures. Other rabbinic texts suggest that the Torah was David's inspiration for composing the psalms, cf. the tradition preserved at *BT Berakhot* 3b in the name of Rav Ashi to the effect that David used to study Torah until midnight, then compose psalms until dawn.

<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 28:1-14, passim. This passage is an elaboration of Leviticus 26:3-13.

obligations, God will always “ restore their fortunes and take them back in love” once they set aside their rebelliousness and become obedient again.<sup>32</sup>

Other texts speak of the possibility of Israel guaranteeing the permanence of this situation by remaining faithful to the commandments of the Torah. The terminology may change from text to text, but the basic point remains the same: there are great things that come along with being the beloved people of God (Deuteronomy 26:18: *'am segulah*), but Israel can only access these marvelous blessings by being faithful to the laws and statutes set down in the Torah. The point of observance, therefore, is to provoke God into granting Israel the widest possible scope of blessing, to make her blessed above all other peoples, even to ward off plague and sickness.<sup>33</sup>

The Psalter, for its part, presents an entire different picture, one rooted, I think, in the prophetic rather than the priestly experience of the divine.

Passages in the psalms that offer political, meteorological, military or agricultural rewards to the pious are very sparse, but the Psalter does return again and again to the idea that the ultimate religious event to which the pious may aspire is intimate, personal communion with God, often expressed specifically as the experience of gazing on the (anthropomorphically conceived) image of the Deity.

The seventeenth psalm is typical in that we can see the poet moving smoothly from the assertion that his supplication is guileless (verse 1) to the justification that his feet have followed the path towards God (verse 5) to the ultimate hope that he can reasonably expect, at least someday, to merit the experience of beholding the face of

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<sup>32</sup> Deuteronomy 30:3, new JPS translation.

<sup>33</sup> These ideas returns over and over again in Deuteronomy: cf. Deuteronomy 4:40 (“keep the commandments...so that it be good for you and for your children after you”), 6:2 (“...so that you fear the Lord...and so that you live a long life”), 7:12-15 (“...then God will love you and bless you and multiply you and bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your new grain and wine and oil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock...you shall be blessed above all other peoples; there shall be no sterile male or female among you or among your livestock. The Lord will ward off from you all sickness...”), 8:1 (“...so that you live and multiply and come to inherit the land...”), 11:9 (“so that you live a long life in the land...”), 12:28 (“...so that it be good for you and for your descendants forever...”), 15:6 (“...for the Lord your God will bless you...you shall lend to other nations, but you shall not borrow / you shall rule over many nations, but none shall rule over you”), 30:9 (“...and the Lord will grant you great prosperity in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your animal(s' wombs) and the fruit of the land...”) and 30:16 (“...that you live and multiply and that the Lord your God bless you...”) Cf. the passage in Exodus 34:11, in which the text insists that the real reward Israel can expect in return for keeping its side of the covenant is God's help in driving out the indigenous peoples of Canaan.

God in a waking state (as opposed to within a dream.)<sup>34</sup> That the Torah specifies (slightly anachronistically) that it was precisely this experience of beholding God's *temunah* that set aside Moses from all the other prophets, let alone pious non-prophets, only delineates the chasm of religious experience that divides Torah from Psalter more clearly.<sup>35</sup>

Some texts specify that this experience of the divine image is to be sought specifically within the confines of the Temple, a fact that presumably reflects the fact that the Levitical singers of the Second Temple period were not peripatetic prophets like their (spiritual) pre-exilic ancestors, but rather Temple functionaries who pursued their spirituality within the context of service to the Jerusalem Temple. Indeed, the fact that the Torah itself takes the distinct traditions about a prophetic sanctuary set up and managed by Moses outside of the camp and a priestly one presided over by Aaron at the very center of the Israelite camp and makes of them one single sanctuary probably reflects the fact that in the day of the final priestly redactor of the text, the spiritual descendants of both the prophets and the priests served together in the same institution.<sup>36</sup> If that was the case, however, then the fact nonetheless remains that these groups didn't coalesce quite to the extent Scripture might be said to forecast, but rather appear to have pursued distinct spiritual paths towards what they probably considered a common goal. Thus, when the author of the sixty-third psalm wrote about his fervent hope to behold God in His sanctuary, he uses the specifically prophetic word *'ehzezh* to denote the experience of gazing on God, just as did the author of the seventeenth psalm.<sup>37</sup> The rather obscure ending to the eleventh psalm (*yashar yehezru fanaimo*) uses the same verb and must be interpreted, I think, along

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<sup>34</sup> Hebrew: *'ani betzedeq 'ehzezh fanekhah / 'esbe'ah vahaqitz temunatekhah.*

<sup>35</sup> Numbers 12:8: for he (Moses) sees the *temunah* of the Lord (when he experiences his prophetic visions.)

<sup>36</sup> See my article "Deconstructing Leviticus 16: Implications for Letter-Day Jewish Spirituality from an Ancient Ritual Text" published recently in *Conservative Judaism*. The texts that refer most specifically to a separate prophetic sanctuary set up outside the Israelite camp and presided over by Moses and his servant Joshua are at Exodus 33:7-11, Numbers 11:16-29, Numbers 12:4-8 and Deuteronomy 33:14-15, but these are overwhelmed by the sheer number of priestly passages in Torah that co-opt the term *'ohel mo'eid* to describe the priestly tabernacle (more properly called the *qodesh* or the *mishkan*), as, e.g. in the fortieth chapter of Exodus or the eighth chapter of Leviticus.

<sup>37</sup> Psalm 63:3: *ken baqqodesh hazitikhah.*

the lines of the seventeenth and sixty-third psalms as well, especially insofar as it too makes reference specifically to the divine face.<sup>38</sup>

The twenty-seventh psalm preserves the same connection between the experience of gazing on God and physical presence in the Temple, but refines the idea somewhat: the poet longs to dwell in the Temple permanently not merely so that he might one day see the divine face, but specifically so that he might gaze (*lah'azot*) on the beauty (*no'am*) of God.<sup>39</sup>

The eleventh, seventeenth, twenty-seventh and sixty-third psalms are all “David” psalms, but it is not only within psalms ascribed to David that the notion of gazing on God occurs. In the Korachite forty-second psalm, for example, the poet calls out, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God / When shall I come and gaze on the face of God?”<sup>40</sup>

Other psalms offer more oblique references that are only explicable with reference to less-guarded passages in the style of the verses mentioned above. Thus, when the author of the 140th psalm declares that the upright (Hebrew: *yesharim*) shall surely dwell in the presence of the divine face, the reference is probably to the same kind of mystical experience held out elsewhere in the Psalter as the appropriate reward for the pious.<sup>41</sup> (Indeed, the opening of the 111th psalm makes specific reference to a smaller conventicle of *yesharim* within a larger congregation that worships God with all their hearts.)<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the reference in the twenty-fourth psalm to a specific circle of people within the author's world who seek the divine face is probably

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<sup>38</sup> Psalm 11:7.

<sup>39</sup> Psalm 27:4, cf. Isaiah 33:17: *melekh beyofyo tehezenah 'einekhah* (“your eyes shall behold the beauty of the king.”) References to the divine face and to the divine *no'am* (plural: *ne'imot*) are brought together at the end of the sixteenth psalm as well.

<sup>40</sup> Psalm 42:3, reading *'ereh* for *'eira'eh* along with the Targum. Cf. Exodus 23:15, 23:17, and 34:24 and 1 Samuel 1:22 for other examples of the Masoretic reading offering a passive verb where the unpointed text would more logically be read as a *qal*, i.e. active, verb.

<sup>41</sup> Psalm 140:14b: *yeishvu yesharim 'et-panekhah*.

<sup>42</sup> Psalm 111:1.

intended to refer specifically to those who cultivated the kind of mystic epiphany referred to in so many other places in the Psalter.<sup>43</sup>

These passages from the various psalms that speak openly (or almost openly) about the experience of visual communion with God can be related to the many passages in the books of the prophets that say basically the same thing. Thus when Amos, Isaiah and Michayahu ben Yimlah declare that they have seen God (at Amos 9:1, Isaiah 6:1 and I Kings 22:19 respectively), their words must have seemed profoundly validating for the singers of those psalms which suggest that the same experience awaits those who achieve intimate enough communion with the divine realm to merit it.

An interesting comparison can be made between the Psalter and the Torah. A number of personalities described in the Torah are said to have seen God: Abraham (cf. Genesis 22:14), Jacob (cf. Genesis 32:31) and, of course, Moses and the elders (Exodus 24:10-11.)<sup>44</sup> None of these passages, however, is held out to the readers of Scripture as something to which they themselves may reasonably aspire. Indeed, the point is made repeatedly in Torah that the average citizen cannot gaze on the Deity and live: Exodus 33:20 (“no person may see Me and live”) makes this explicit, but it is implicit in other passages as well, e.g. Exodus 19:21, where the point is made that the Israelites must be restrained lest they fall in record numbers as a result of having seen the Deity, or Leviticus 16:2, where Aaron is warned specifically against entering the innermost part of the sanctuary lest he die as a result of seeing God. In the one example of a collective experience of seeing God in Torah, the story preserved in Exodus 24:1-11, the point is made that the incident was extraordinary precisely in that God did not “send His hand” against the Israelite nobles *despite* the fact that they had seen (Hebrew: *yehēzu*) God.<sup>45</sup>

The case of Moses deserves special mention. As noted above, the point is made repeatedly in Torah that Moses was able (or rather, was allowed) to see God. Not only was he present when the elders saw God, but the clear implication of Exodus 20:18 is that Moses was vouchsafed the experience of visual communion with God when he ascended the mountain to receive the rest of the commandments. Furthermore, the

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<sup>43</sup> Psalm 24:6, using the new JPS translation of *dor* as “circle.”

<sup>44</sup> There may well once have been a similar story about Hagar, a remnant of which is embedded in the name of the well revealed at Genesis 16:13-14.

<sup>45</sup> Exodus 24:11. Note that the Targumim and the Septuagint all “fix” the passage one way or another to make it less anomalous. On this feature of the Septuagint, see Charles T. Fritsch's article “A Study of the Greek Translation of the Hebrew Verbs “To See” with Deity as Subject and Object” published in the Harry M. Orlinsky honorary volume (=Eretz-Israel Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies, volume 16), ed. B. Levine and A. Malamat (Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 51-56.

text of Torah states at Numbers 12:8 and Deuteronomy 34:10 that Moses saw God directly, although the point is made in both passages that this was a totally unique experience. Even Deuteronomy 31:15, which still speaks of the *'ohel mo'eid* as a distinctly prophetic sanctuary outside of the camp, makes the point that Moses did not experience merely the visitation of a pillar of cloud that *symbolized* the presence of God in the Tent of Meeting when he experienced prophetic communion there, but that he actually saw the image of God when he repaired to his private place of prophecy.

Whether the prophet that would someday arise who would be “like” Moses would also merit such an intimate visual experience of the divine is a moot point. The last few verses of Torah seem to indicate that this would not be the case, and it is also worth noticing that the text at Deuteronomy 18:15-19 that mentions this future Moses-like prophet specifically enumerates the ways in which he (or she) will be like Moses—and the ability to see God and survive is not on the list.

In a certain sense, the various passages in Torah that speak of Moses specifically as a prophet can be described as deeply anti-prophetic in that they grant to Moses alone experiences that most, or at least many, of the pre- and (I would imagine) post-exilic prophets would have felt capable of attaining. Is there a connection between the psalmist's reference in the sixth verse of the thirty-fourth psalm to the effect that those who gaze upon God become radiant (Hebrew: *venaharu*) and the reference in Torah (at Exodus 34:30-35) to the way in which Moses' own face shone after experiencing close communion with God? I would suspect that there is, although the language used in both passages is different.

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How does one come to see God? King Uzziah seems to have taken lessons from a certain Zachariah and the Chronicler reports that God so enjoyed the experience, presumably the experience of being seen by the king, that he granted him special prosperity as a result.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, however, the authors of the various psalms leave their techniques, at least for the most part, as undisclosed as the methods of the king's mystic tutor were left unreported by the Chronicler. But among the many texts within the Psalter that speak of seeking God (many of which use the same verb used

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<sup>46</sup> 2 Chronicles 26:5.

by the Chronicler to denote Uzziah's successful quest for visual communion with God) are more than a few that offer some tantalizing suggestions.

The twenty-seventh psalm, for example, suggests that the act of seeking God took place within the precincts of the Temple itself.<sup>47</sup> The twenty-second psalm, echoing the account of the elders on Sinai in Exodus 24, adds the possibility that the experience was cultivated in the context of a sacred meal of some sort.<sup>48</sup> Other texts add other possible aspects of the experience. Thus the sixty-ninth and seventieth psalms confirm what the larger context of the Psalter suggested all along, that the experience was cultivated in the context of hymn singing or chanting and of the search for intense feelings of inner joy.<sup>49</sup> Other passages are more obscure. Does the reference to Jacob in the twenty-fourth psalm tell us, for example, that Jacob was the patriarch deemed to be the father of the mystic quest for visual communion with God?<sup>50</sup> It would make sense given his experiences at Peniel, a place specifically named by Jacob in honor of his having had precisely that experience in that place, but the context in the Psalter is not sufficiently fleshed out to permit any conclusive thought on the matter.<sup>51</sup>

Was there a messianic element to the larger undertaking, as the tenth verse of the eighty-fourth psalm might suggest, or merely a royal one? And even if the original author's intent was to connect the search for a vision of God with the experience of

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<sup>47</sup> As noted above regarding Psalm 27:4.

<sup>48</sup> Psalm 22:27, cf. Psalm 34:11, where the satiety of the "Seekers of God" (one of the terms also used in Psalm 22) is contrasted with the hunger of their rivals. On the other hand, the beginning of the forty-second psalm could be read to suggest that those who sought out communion with the divine face did so in a context of fasting from food and, especially, from drink. Perhaps the idea is that the actual experience of communion was preceded by a period of fasting, but completed in the context of feasting.

<sup>49</sup> Psalms 69:33 and 70:5. The singing of long, repetitive hymns was also a feature of the mystic methodology of the merkavah mystics of the Talmudic and post-Talmudic periods. See the responsum of Hai Gaon published by B.M. Levin in his *'Otzar Hagg'e'onim to Hagigah* (Jerusalem, 1932), p. 14. The opening verses of the 105th psalm also include references to intense joy and the singing of hymns in the specific context of seeking communion with the face of God. Psalm 4:7-8 also connects the idea of experiencing the light of God's face with the idea of joy. Cf. Psalm 16:11 and 21:7, where the concepts of joy and the face of God are also linked.

<sup>50</sup> Psalm 24:6.

<sup>51</sup> Jacob at Peniel: Genesis 32:30.

gazing on the king, then how did the Levites in the post-exilic period understand that concept to apply to their own mysticism?

Are all the references to the face of God somehow connected with this Levitical mysticism of the post-exilic age? Surely, for example, one can read the end of the ninth psalm without recourse to anything but the literal (i.e. non-mystical) meaning of the text.<sup>52</sup> In a similar category are the references to the theme of *hastarat panim* (“the hiding of the [divine] face”) in the Psalter: can these not be taken simply as references to the withdrawal of divine intervention in the world as a punishment for human intransigence and sinfulness?<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, other references to the divine face can easily be interpreted as part of the larger complex of ideas surrounding the search for visual communion. The regular references to the light of the divine face, for example, suggest that the actual peak experience of gazing on the Deity was accomplished in a context of some sort of intense light.<sup>54</sup>

What kind of experience lies just behind the reference in the thirty-first psalm to the *yerei'im* being hidden within the hidden folds of the divine face?<sup>55</sup> To the *yesharim* dwelling (or sitting?) with the divine face?<sup>56</sup> To the psalmist rising at midnight to

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<sup>52</sup> Psalm 9:20.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Psalms 13:2, 27:9, 30:8, 44:25, 51:11 (where the psalmist anomalously sees the image as something positive, i.e. that God will agree to turn His face away from the poet's sins), 69:18, 88:15, 102:3, 104:29 and 143:7.

<sup>54</sup> The eightieth psalm, for example, returns to this theme no less than four times, i.e. in verses 4, 8, 17 (where the reference is to fire rather than light and the idea is that the light can become too intense [i.e. it can turn to fire] if the epiphany is left uncontrolled; cf. Ps 21:10) and 20. Cf. also Psalms 31:17, 44:4, 89:15-16, 90:8 and 119:135.

<sup>55</sup> Psalm 31:21.

<sup>56</sup> Psalm 140:14, as noted above.

supplicate before the divine face?<sup>57</sup> To people called “Servants of God” gathering together in the Temple court at midnight?<sup>58</sup>

And what did the proponents of this mystical experience call themselves? Seers? Prophets?<sup>59</sup> The Humble Ones?<sup>60</sup> The Seekers of God?<sup>61</sup> The Seekers of the Divine Face?<sup>62</sup> The Upright?<sup>63</sup> The Pious?<sup>64</sup> The God-Fearers?<sup>65</sup> The Righteous?<sup>66</sup> The Servants of God?<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, what are the wider implications of the fact that not all the psalms refer to this kind of mystic communion? That not all the Levites were initiates into this particular kind of religious experience? That private conventicles of mystics existed within the Temple hierarchy and staff to which some were admitted and others excluded? That the Levites simply lead complex religious lives in which the quest for visual communion with God was only one aspect among many?

The answers to all of these questions are lost in the past. Even unanswered, however, they create a clear sense that the Psalter provided a literary counterpart to the priestly spirituality of the Torah. Since the Psalter undoubtedly received its final literary form

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<sup>57</sup> Psalm 119:58 and 62, presuming both verses to be referring to the same experience.

<sup>58</sup> Psalm 134:1.

<sup>59</sup> Although the word for prophet (Hebrew: *navi*) is suspiciously lacking in the Psalter.

<sup>60</sup> As, e.g., at Psalm 69:33.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, cf. Psalm 34:11.

<sup>62</sup> As, e.g., at Psalm 24:6 or Psalm 70:5.

<sup>63</sup> As, e.g., at Psalm 140:14.

<sup>64</sup> I.e. the *hasidim*, as in Psalm 132:9, where the term is used as the counterpart of *kohanim*. Cf. Deuteronomy 33:8, where the term *hasid* is specifically applied to the tribe of Levi. Does the following verse (i.e. Deuteronomy 33:9) imply that some members of the tribe of Levi were obliged to break with their families and to live lives apart from their parents, siblings and children? Could that be a reference to groups of Levites who formed private conventicles for mystical purposes of some sort?

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Psalm 118:4, where the group, presumably the Levites, within the Temple population that aren't the Israelites or the priests are called God-Fearers.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Psalm 118:20, where the people who pass through the gate to (gaze on?) God are called the Righteous (*tzaddiqim*).

<sup>67</sup> As noted above regarding Psalm 134:1.

in the post-exilic period, it is interesting to wonder if that was not the perspective of its editors as well. The Psalter and the Torah are, after all, parallel works in a variety of ways: their five-book structure,<sup>68</sup> their strange mix of first- and third person material, their internally inconsistent redactional traits,<sup>69</sup> their unselfconscious presentation of the same material in parallel passages<sup>70</sup> and their mixture of priestly and prophetic passages, albeit with different emphases.

For us modern readers, the Psalter may not be dismissed or marginalized (as so often is the case) as a book of old poems printed in the back of the Bible. It is my conviction that a profound understanding both of Israelite religion and of Judaism (or rather, Judah-ism) can only develop from a clear sense of the paths not taken by our spiritual ancestors, one of which is clearly the neo-prophetism of the Psalter. Israel is a kingdom of priests not because it couldn't have become a kingdom of prophets, but because that is the way history ended up working out. But the prophets of ancient Israel are the forebears of the Jewish people as well as the priests—and a good deal of what Judaism and Jewish spirituality are today is what they were first. Trying to imagine a less priestly, severely less deuteronomic Judaism is a difficult exercise this long after the fact, but it is ultimately the reason we study the books of the ancients in the first place: to see what we are by identifying clearly what we could have been.

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And one final question: Did God speak to those who sought Him in the same way (or in some analogous way) that He allowed Himself to be seen? The author of the fiftieth psalm seems to state that part of his experience of communion with God involved hearing divine speech.<sup>71</sup> I hope to return to the question of hearing God in a subsequent essay on the spirituality of the Psalms.

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<sup>68</sup> The Psalter is divided into five books as follows: Book I: Psalms 1-41, Book II: Psalms 42-72, Book III: Psalms 73-89, Book IV: Psalms 90-106 and Book V: Psalms 107-150.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Psalm 72:20 (“Here end the prayer of David son of Jesse”) when dozens of psalms ascribed to David follow and Leviticus 26:46 (“These are the statutes, laws and *torot* that God...gave into the hand of Moses at Mount Sinai”) when the very next verse introduces a section of text said (at Leviticus 27:34) to be constituted of different laws given by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. Even if the latter verse was meant to refer to all of Leviticus, then the book still has two endings.

<sup>70</sup> Within the psalms: Psalm 14=Psalm 53; Psalm 70:2-6=Psalm 40:14-18; Psalm 108=Psalm 57:8-12 and 60:7-14.

<sup>71</sup> Psalm 50:3, cf. Psalm 83:2.