

A PORTRAIT OF THE RIGHTEOUS PERSON

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Introduction

Psalm 15 was most likely composed independently for use in a specific cultic setting as is argued by Hermann Gunkel:

Ps. 15 most clearly presupposes a specific worship service. The priest communicates an answer for the laity to the question of their condition if they wish entry onto the holy mountain. However, the text does not offer a single word regarding which festival would have included this kind of question and answer.¹

Gunkel challenges Mowinckel's contention that Psalm 15 is connected with the annual festival of the enthronement of Yahweh.² While Gunkel disputes Mowinckel's assertion that this psalm's usage can be pin-pointed to a specific event on the Israelite calendar, I question the "presupposed worship service" that causes this psalm to be read as a liturgical entrance psalm. Gunkel himself says, "The response [to the question in v. 1] we think must come from the mouth of the priest."³ Could the question posed in verse 1 be a rhetorical question similar to the one asked by the prophet in Micah 6:6-7? Other rhetorical questions appear elsewhere in the first book of the Psalter (Pss. 8:5; 11:3; 27:1; 39:7). Then, what is the point?

It is possible that this psalm circulated independently beyond its original setting in life, being used in situations other than the one for which it was initially composed. It is also possible that this psalm circulated with two or three similar temple worship psalms such as Psalms 24, 48, 65, and 87. We simply do not

¹ Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (completed by Joachim Begrich, trans. James D. Noglaski, Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998), 72.

² Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas, 2 vols.; New York: Abingdon, 1967), 1:178-80.

³ Gunkel, *Introduction to the Psalms*, 313. This interpretation has been widely accepted. See, for example, Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (trans. Herbert Harwell, OTL; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962), 167-68; Marc Girard, *Les Psaumes: Analyse Structurelle et Interpretation: 1-50* (Recherches Nouvelle Serie 2; Montreal: Bellarmin, 1984), 139; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary* (trans. Hilton C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 226; and W. H. Bellinger, *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990), 89.

know as much as we would *like* to know about the history of this psalm. However, we can observe the setting of Psalm 15 within the first book of the Psalter, Psalms 1-41. Therefore, I begin this study with a translation of Psalm 15 followed by a brief reflection upon its present setting— within the first book of psalms.

Translation

- 1 A psalm of David:
 0 Yahweh, who may sojourn in your tent?
 Who may dwell on your holy hill?
 2 The person who walks honestly⁴ and who practices what is right
 and who speaks truth in his heart,
 3 Does not slander with his tongue, does no evil to his friend
 and does not take up a reproach against his neighbor.
 4 In his eyes a man scorned (by God) is despised
 but he honors those who fear Yahweh;
 who swears (an oath) that causes (him) harm⁵ but does not change.
 5 He who does not give out his money at interest nor takes a bribe against the
 innocent;
 he who does these things shall never be moved.

Psalm Type

Since Gunkel's watershed studies, Psalm 15 (along with Psalm 24) has usually been classified as an *entrance liturgy* psalm. We do not know if it was originally composed as an entrance, liturgy, to be used responsively (that is, the worshipper asks the question in verse 1, and the priest utters the answer in verses 2-5). Perhaps such a request was the *Sitz im Leben* of the poem, or perhaps the psalm was originally a wisdom-type psalm in which the psalmist asked a rhetorical question and answered it himself. I cannot rule out the possibility that the psalmist asked the question only to have some "inner voice" reveal the virtues required to dwell in Yahweh's presence. Then, perhaps this poem was later adapted and used in the liturgy for the temple. We just do not know for certain.

I prefer to read Psalm 15, however, within its present, canonical context, as a wisdom-influenced psalm;⁶ that is, its is primarily didactic in purpose. Psalm 15 delineates the way of righteousness (the way of life), which stands in stark contrast to the way of wickedness (destruction). I am aware of the difficulties

⁴ Compare Amos 5:10: "They hate him who reproves in the gate and they abhor him who speaks truthfully/honestly" (אִישׁ אֲדֹנָי). Here in Amos 5:10-12 the focus is also upon social justice.

⁵ Compare the translation to his own hurt" in L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, eds., *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), 902. The Septuagint (and the Syriac) correct the problem by translating the phrase "who swears to his neighbor and does not set (it) aside."

⁶ Compare Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: 1-50*, AB (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966): 83.

involved in even defining what is and is not a wisdom psalm,⁷ but I read Psalm 15 similar to the way I read the other wisdom (or better, "wisdom-influenced") psalms such as Pss. 34:12–14 [English vv]; 37:28–31, and 112:4–6, 9 (cf. Job 29:12–17; 31:5–21). In other words, my focus is upon what Whybray calls "modes of thought" characteristic of biblical wisdom (Job, Proverbs, Qohelet)⁸ instead of upon a particular genre or literary form called "wisdom." My interest in wisdom-influenced psalms is here very narrow, consisting of texts that list specific virtues. Interestingly, Psalm 101 would be another example of a psalm that lists specific personal virtues or examples of ethical actions. In fact, depending on how one counts, there appear to be ten such virtues also listed in Psalm 101.

I cannot prove that such a reading of Psalm 15 is the original usage, but I think this approach will open the way to a better understanding of the psalm as it stands here between Psalms 14 and 16. Among the psalms of the first book, this psalm is hardly unique as a "non-lament." In fact, several of the psalms in the first book are not laments.⁹ What, then, is the function of this psalm in its present location? Are there any apparent connections between Psalm 15 and the preceding psalm or to the concepts in Psalms 1–14? First of all, I will work through the individual verses of the psalm, paying attention to especially significant psalmic terms and concepts. Then I will ask whether the ten "social justice" virtues (i.e., "love your neighbor as yourself") listed in Ps. 15:2–5 contain any allusions to the material found in the Decalogue.

Analysis of Psalm 15

Part One

As I read through Psalm 15 and worked on the translation, certain terms and concepts captured my attention. These are deserving of closer study because of the richness and depth they add to the understanding and interpretation of the psalm. First, in verse 1 the general consensus is that **לְהַלְלֵהוּ** is parallel to "holy hill" and refers to the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem (compare the use of the term to refer to Jerusalem in Isaiah 33:20 [cf. Ps 27:5–6; Ezek 41:1]).¹⁰ The way the

⁷ See especially Norman Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 15–17. As examples of "pure wisdom" psalms (as opposed to interpolated "wisdom elements"), he lists Pss 8; 14//53; 25; 34; 39; 49; 73; 90; 112; 127; 131, and 139 (60–73). Cf. Whybray, "The Wisdom Psalms," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton* (ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williams; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 154, 159–60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37. Cf. G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 47–48.

⁹ Pss. 8, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, and 37. Lament psalms dominate not only Book I but Books I–III. See Bellinger, *Psalms: Reading and Studying*, 45, 75, and 81.

¹⁰ Kraus points out this is not an "archaizing" expression but rather a reflection of the tent sanctuary tradition found in 2 Sam 7:6 (Psalms 1–59, 228). He does, nevertheless,

question is asked is significant: not, "who may enter your tent, O Yahweh?" but "who may *sojourn* (גִּיר) in your tent?" In other psalms, the term בּוֹא is typically used to talk about entering or coming into the presence of Yahweh (see Pss 5:8; 42:3; 96:8; 100:2, 4; 118:19—20). Why is a different term used here? The usage of the term גִּיר in the rest of the Psalter sheds light on its connotation in 15:1. In Ps 5:5 we find that "evil cannot sojourn" with God. Evil is an unwelcome guest, not a protected sojourner or stranger—protected under the Torah. Kellermann, in his comment on Ps 5:5, says "commentators and translators assume that *gur* has the general meaning, 'to dwell, tarry.' However, it is also possible to get a deeper understanding . . . if the meaning of *ger* is kept in mind when translating *gur*."¹¹ He goes on to point out that in Ps 39:13 the psalmist "knows that he is only a *ger*, 'guest,' . . . before Yahweh, like all his fathers."¹² Other occurrences of גִּיר are found in Pss 61:5 (in the context of refuge, shelter); 94:6 and 146:9 (a protected person, along with the widow and the orphan); 105:12, 23 (in the context, Yahweh cares for the sojourners); and 120:5.

Second, the phrase וַפְּעִל צֶדֶק in verse 2 is interesting and important in any canonical reading of this psalm. Three earlier psalms (5:6; 6:9; 14:4) mention the "workers of iniquity." This phrase is one of several designations for the psalmists' enemies. In stark contrast to the "workers of iniquity" who "devour my people as they devour bread" and "do not call upon Yahweh" (14:4), here in Psalm 15 we encounter a person who is a "worker (doer) of what is right" (v. 2) and who is known for his godly behavior towards his fellow citizens, not his abuse of them (vv. 3-5). He or she also does call upon Yahweh (v. 1).

Third, at my first reading of Psalm 15, verse 4 seemed out of place. The psalmist has been praising the righteous person for the considerate and ethical treatment of others (v. 3), and this theme is again picked up in verses 4b—5. Yet here in the first part of verse 4 we read "in whose eyes a vile person is despised."¹³ This virtue does not sound very "ethical." The verbal form מֵאֵס appears in eight other psalmic texts. In five of these eight occurrences, God is the subject of the verb—he is the one who "scorns"¹⁴ or "rejects"¹⁵ certain individuals

believe Psalm 15 is pre-exilic (227). This echoes the opinion of Gunkel (*Introduction to the Psalms*, 330).

¹¹ See D. Kellermann, גִּיר, in *TDOT* 2:448.

¹² *Ibid.*, 449. See also James L. Mays, *Psalms. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 84: "To speak about being in this sacred space, [Ps 15] uses language from Israel's social life that referred to the resident alien, the outsider who was permitted to live along with those to whom tents and territory belonged. Those who enter the presence are like resident aliens, because they have no inherent right to be there; the privilege must be granted," Cf. Ps 119:19.

¹³ This translation comes from Harold Fisch, ed., *The Jerusalem Bible*. Compare the NRSV: "in whose eyes the wicked are despised." Neither of these seem to get at the meaning of the term מֵאֵס as it is used in the Psalter.

¹⁴ William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based Upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 180. He suggests "scorned" for Ps 15:4 and Jer 6:30.

¹⁵ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English*

or groups of individuals (Pss 53:6; 58:8; 78:59, 67; and 89:39). Thus in Psalm 15 it is virtuous to despise those who have been rejected by Yahweh. In the canonical context of the psalm, those despised are certainly the aforementioned "workers of iniquity," the enemies of the psalmists, the wicked whose way is not known by Yahweh (Ps 1:6).

Both Kraus and Craigie astutely point out that the parallel line in verse 4b indicates that companionship or "daily associations" is on the mind of the psalmist, although Kraus alone makes the connection with Psalm 1:1.¹⁶ Dahood comments: "Just as no evil man can be a guest in Yahweh's tent (vs. 1, Pss v 5, xxiv 3), so the hospitality of the godly man does not extend to the wicked."¹⁷

In verse 5 the idea of stability is of special interest. In a holistic reading of the Psalter, we have already come across the word *וַיִּבֶן* in Ps 10:6, where it is found on the lips of the wicked who arrogantly says in his heart: "I will not be moved." This confidence, of course, is vain. Yahweh the eternal king will break the arm (strength) of the wicked person and will "seek out his wickedness" until there is none left to find (Ps 10:15). In later psalms, the promise in Ps 15:5 is echoed quite frequently in the psalmists' assertions of stability in Yahweh (Pss 16:8; 17:5; 21:8; 30:7; 55:23; 62:3, 7; 66:9; 112:6; 121:3; cf. 46:6; 93:1; 96:10; 104:5; 125:1).

Part Two

Now I will examine the basic structure of Psalm 15 and any possible allusions to the material found in the Decalogue. Mowinckel observed that verses 2-5 list ten virtues or activities of the person who is allowed to sojourn in Yahweh's tent on his holy hill. In a discussion of Psalm 81:9-10, he says:

The influence of this 'decalogical tradition' is also clearly seen in Ps. 15, where the number of commandments making the 'laws of entrance', the 'conditions of admission' to temple and salvation, are precisely ten; this is certainly no mere accident. . . . The existing *toroth* of entry belong to the decalogical tradition. The traditional figure 10 in such groupings of the fundamental commandments of the covenant . . . is probably derived from the instruction of pilgrims: one commandment for each finger.¹⁸

Lexicon of the Old Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907; repr. 1978), 549.

¹⁶ Kraus, *Psalms*, 230; Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1983), 152.

¹⁷ Dahood, *Psalms I: 1-50*, 84.

¹⁸ Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1:158, 179. See also A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* (London: Oliphants, 1972), 136; and Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*. Craigie admits there is some uncertainty here, but says the number ten is "confirmed by the inner grouping of positive and negative conditions. Three positive conditions are followed by three negative conditions, then two positive followed by two negative—total ten" (150). Contrast Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 228.

In addition to Mowinckel's theory about the pedagogical significance of the number ten, one should also consider the theological significance of this number. M. Pope has called attention to the twofold sacred nature of the number ten. First, the number is used often to connote "completeness." Second, "as a sacred number, ten may derive some of its significance from the fact that it is the sum of the two other especially sacred numbers, three and seven." Finally, the sanctity of the Ten Commandments would have given this number added significance.¹⁹

While Craigie agrees that there are ten conditions listed in Psalm 15 reminiscent of the Decalogue's "ten words" (Exod 20:1-17; Deut 5:1-21), he dismisses the possibility of any "precise inner correspondences between the conditions and the Commandments."²⁰ He echoes Mowinckel and emphasizes the pedagogical function of the ten conditions or virtues corresponding to the ten fingers on the student's hand.

I suggest that the possibility of correspondence between the Decalogue and Psalm 15 is not entirely out of the question. Although "precise" correspondences are not apparent, it is possible to hear in Psalm 15 allusions to the Decalogue, especially the last six of the ten words that deal with the treatment of one's "neighbor" (Exod 20:12-17). I do not intend to argue that these allusions are definitely what the author of Psalm 15 had in mind. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that the psalmist is alluding to the ethical intent of the Decalogue, which would have been ancient and well-established in the consciousness of the people even by the time of a pre-exilic psalmist. What follows is a re-reading of Psalm 15, this time looking not at specific terms and their usage in the Psalter, but rather at the general concepts or ethical implications of the ten conditions listed. Correspondences will be highlighted between these ethical precepts and the ethical implications of the prohibitions in Exod 20:12-17. I am arguing for "general correspondences" in thought and not that each condition in Psalm 15 is a direct allusion to ethical principles found in the Decalogue.

Of course, on the other hand, the claim by J. Blenkinsopp (and others) that in its final form the Pentateuch is a product of the Persian period²¹ could well

¹⁹ Marvin H. Pope, "Number, Numbering, Numbers," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. G. A. Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 3:565-66. On the antiquity of finger counting to ten (Egypt, 26th century B.C.E.; ancient Persia) and on the significance of the number itself, see Georges Ifrah, *From One to Zero: A Universal History of Numbers* (trans. Lowell Bair; New York: Viking, 1985), xii, 26-29, 32, and 55. Could Ps. 15:1 be viewed as another example of catechetical or school questions? (see G. von Rad, *Wisdom*, 18-19). Cf. G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 252.

²⁰ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 150.

²¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 239-41. He also discusses the Deuteronomistic (mid-sixth century B.C.E.) influence upon the final version of the Decalogue in Exodus.

account for the correspondences between wisdom-influenced psalms and the Decalogue. Similarly, the wisdom literature is typically dated in the post-exilic period although its roots reach into early ancient Israelite home and clan life.

Blenkinsopp goes on to challenge Mowinckel's theory that the Decalogue is cultic in origin, based on the correspondences between Psalm 15 and Exod 20:2-17. He correctly points out the allusions to these ethical requirements as early as the eighth-century prophets.²² Others have noted the close relationship between those wisdom psalms or wisdom-influenced psalms listed above and torah (instruction/law). R. E. Murphy, for example, calls attention not just to the similarity between wisdom psalms and *tora* but, in the larger picture, to the similarity between "wisdom" in general and "law":

It is reasonable to think that what later became "wisdom" and "law" was at first an undifferentiated mass of commands, prohibitions, and observations concerning life. At this level there is a pre-urban and pre-school stage of instruction where the family and tribe are at the center of society. Only later did instruction become differentiated into the scholastic and legal areas. Indeed, the Decalogue itself is a reflection of the ethos of early Israel.²³

I do not wish to "reclassify" Psalm 15 as a wisdom psalm, but merely to note its didactic qualities. My first observation concerns the general message of this psalm and how it corresponds to the Decalogue. That is, the close connection between the worship of Yahweh (cult) and treatment of other human beings within the covenant (ethics).²⁴ In the Decalogue, the first four commandments focus upon one's responsibility towards Yahweh while the last six focus upon one's responsibility to the community. Similarly, Psalm 15 deftly combines the idea of communion with Yahweh (v. 1) with social or ethical stipulations (vv. 2-5). This emphasis upon social justice is often attributed to the eighth-century prophets, yet their insistence that acceptance before Yahweh presupposes social righteousness goes back to the teaching of the Torah.

The specific conditions in Psalm 15 recall the Decalogue: "Who speaks truth in his heart,"²⁵ "does not slander with his tongue," and "does not take up a

20 (207-8).

²² Ibid., 208-9.

²³ Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 4.

²⁴ Similar to Murphy's aforementioned connection of wisdom and law as having a common background and development, A. Ceresko, "The Sage in the Psalms," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake, In.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) reminds us that "the Psalter itself is clearly the product of the torah/wisdom teachers, and the final form of this collection of psalms bears the stamp of their influence and intent" (217).

²⁵ Dahood (*Psalms I*, 83) translates "from his heart," citing the article by Nahum Sarna, "The Interchangeability of the Prepositions Beth and Min in Biblical Hebrew," *JBL* 78 (1959): 310-16. Cf. Mark D. Futato, "The Preposition 'Beth' in the Hebrew Psalter"

reproach against his neighbor" (vv. 2–3) recalls the prohibition against "bearing false witness against your neighbor" in Exod 20:16. In this case, the psalm is more detailed in its description of the ethical behavior required of the person who stands in Yahweh's presence. What would "bearing false witness against a neighbor" look like? It begins in the heart of person. The best way to keep from transgressing the ninth commandment is to be a person of integrity and honesty who speaks truth from the heart. Again, this kind of personal character is a stark contrast to the person envisioned in Ps 12:3—the person who speaks with a "double heart" (see also Ps 28:3).

Other specific ways to break the ninth commandment are spelled out. One might engage in slandering one's neighbor, making false and malicious statements that could, at the very least, damage the neighbor's reputation in the community of God's people. If this slander took place in a legal trial at the city gate, for example, the consequences for the accused could be even more severe. Ps 15:5 appears to indicate that a judicial context is not an unlikely setting for the slander mentioned in verse 3. Likewise, if one took up a reproach (assumedly, a baseless one) against a neighbor, it would have damaging results. In these three conditions from Psalm 15 and the prohibition in Exodus 20, the human tongue is used as a powerful weapon against one's fellow participant in the covenant with Yahweh, against a person who shares the history of having been "brought out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." This becomes even more serious if one recalls the Hebrew concept of the innate power contained within the spoken word: That is, these accusations and deceitful words contain the power to cause harm. They are not empty words but, potentially damaging deeds.²⁶

A person who uses speech in such a way is not acting in concert with Yahweh's holiness and righteousness. Instead, that person is behaving like the enemies of the psalmists (at least, as described in Book I) who speak deceitfully (see Pss 3:3; 4:3; 5:7, 10; 7:4;²⁷ 10:7; 12:3; 13:5; 22:7–9; 27:13; 35:11, 20–21; 36:4; and 41:6–7). In fact, a perusal of these passages in their respective literary contexts reveals that a dominant hallmark of the evil-doing enemies is their threatening evil speech against the godly, ethical psalmists.²⁸ They also foolishly speak against Yahweh himself (2:2–3; 10:3–4; 11, 13; 12:4–5; 14:1).

WTJ 41 (Fall 1978): 68–81. Craigie (*Psalms 1–50*) correctly points to the primary focus as the "inner truth of the heart (viz., the mind), which in turn results in the outward speaking of truth" (149).

²⁶ On the pervasive belief in the "magical power of the [spoken] word" see G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (San Francisco: Harper, 1962), 1:143. See also J. Bergman, H. Lutzmann, and W. H. Schmidt, **רַב־דָּבָר**, in *TDOT*, 3:85–87, 92–93, 115–16, and Siegfried Wagner, **רַב־דָּבָר**, in *TDOT*, 1:332, 336.

²⁷ Implied here is a setting in which the psalmist finds himself falsely accused (cf. v. 1: "concerning the words of Cush;" and vv. 10b–11).

²⁸ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (trans. Keith Crim; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986). See, esp., 129–30, 132.

In Ps 15:3, "does no evil to his friend" (in the context of ten conditions), recalls the ethical provisions within the Decalogue. Again, the correspondence is general, allusive—not precise. Unlike the previous example, in this case the psalmic virtue is abstract, and the commandments in Exod 20:13ff. are concrete. Certainly, doing evil to one's friend casts a broad net that could include numberless offenses against others. Exodus 20 lists three concrete examples of "evil" against others: murder, adultery, and stealing.²⁹

In Ps 15:4b, we actually have one of only two³⁰ semantic connections to the Decalogue—the term **יִרְאֵהוּ**. Here the object of honor is "those that fear Yahweh" while in Exodus 20 it is one's parents (Exod 20:12). In both texts the righteous person is known for his or her attitude and behavior towards others. This commandment in Exodus 20 is interesting in another way—it carries a "promise."³¹ It says "honor your father and your mother so that your days may be long upon the land that Yahweh your God is giving you" (Exod 20:12). One may also read Psalm 15:5 as a promise: "the one who does these things [including honoring those who fear Yahweh] will never be moved." While using different terminology, both of these promises concern stability and security ("peace," "well-being") for the person who is obedient to Yahweh's ethical code. Kraus comments:

The participant in worship on Zion before Yahweh, who is a God of justice and aid, shows his **יִקְרֵהוּ** in the hidden deals and business transactions which are not accessible to the intervention of any judicial agent. . . . Every visitor of Zion is asked to give a declaration of loyalty: Do you also conduct your life in accordance with the covenant of Yahweh? Is Yahweh the Lord of your everyday life?³²

Ethical worshippers are those who will not be moved but who will be sustained and supported by Yahweh, just as they have supported the neighbor.

Canonical Setting

Now it is appropriate to return to the question of the form and function of Psalm 15 within its setting in Book I of the Psalter. As mentioned earlier, some commentators have conceded that this psalm may be classified as a wisdom psalm due to the emphasis on Torah stipulations, especially ethical concerns.³³

²⁹ Perhaps even "coveting" (Exod 20:17) should be included in a list of evil *acts* perpetrated against one's neighbor. See von Rad, *Theology*, 1:191 n. 9: "Even with coveting what is in question is an act, illegal machinations, as J. Herrmann has shown in *Festschrift für E. Sellin*, Leipzig 1927, pp. 69ff. Cf. Mic. 2, 2."

³⁰ See also Ps 15:3 and Exod 20:16, 17 (tDN-12).

³¹ See Paul's description of the commandment to honor one's parents in Eph 6:2, "τίμα τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα, ἥτις ἐστὶν ἐντολὴ πρώτη ἐν ἐπαγγελία."

³² Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 230-31.

³³ Anderson (*Psalms*) notices this emphasis in Psalm 15 and highlights a similar theme in prophetic passages such as Jer 7:1 ff.; Ezek 18:5—9; Mic 6:6ff. and Isa 33:14ff.

Psalm 15 might be classified as a wisdom psalm in the same sense as Psalm 1, which describes the moral attributes of the righteous. Craigie says: "Thus it is possible that Ps 15 is a wisdom poem, based perhaps upon the form of the entrance liturgy; its didactic role would have been in the instruction of young people concerning the moral implications of participating in worship."³⁴ Once again, the major interest of this paper is not to argue for a form critical "re-classification" of Psalm 15. This psalm certainly can (and should) be read as an entrance liturgy psalm. This psalm could just as easily be read simply in the context of wisdom ethics. My concern is to highlight the didactic (or catechetical?) use of Psalm 15 as it stands here in the final form of Book I of the Psalter, immediately after Psalm 14. My interest is to call attention to correspondences between the ethical attributes of the righteous person in Psalm 15 and the ethical requirements listed in the Decalogue. In commenting on the other entrance liturgy psalm, Ps. 24, McCann correctly says:

The identification of Psalm 24 as an "entrance liturgy" and the attempt to identify its liturgical setting do not deal adequately with the content and theology of the psalm. . . . When our attention is directed beyond questions of form and function to matters of content and theology, we notice that Psalm 24 addresses the same fundamental issues that we have encountered in Psalms 1-2, 8, 19, 95-96, 100.³⁵

What connections exist between Psalm 15 and Psalm 14 or the other preceding psalms of Book I? The possibility of some kind of interconnectedness is suggested by J. Brennan's study of Psalms 1-8.³⁶ First; the concluding promise of Psalm 15 represents an actual semantic link between this psalm and other psalms in Book I. Psalm 10:6, where the wicked person thinks he will never be moved nor find himself in troubled times, evidences this link. This arrogant, wicked person engages in many behaviors that are direct opposites of the behaviors of the righteous person pictured in Ps 15:2-5. He pursues the *רָשָׁע* and murders the *צַדִּיק* (10:2, 8) in contrast to the righteous person who does no evil to his friend and does not take a bribe against the *צַדִּיק* (15:3, 5). The mouth of the wicked is full of deceitful and fraudulent speech (10:7; cf. 5:7) while the righteous person in Psalm 15 walks honestly and speaks truthfully (v. 2). He or

He wisely cautions, however, against assuming interdependence (much less, dependence upon the part of the writer of Ps. 15 [136]). He finally says: "Both Ps. 15 and the prophets may belong to the same stream of Yahwism which was firmly rooted in the Covenant traditions" (137). Cf. Gunkel, *Introduction*, 289. Cf. W. H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms and Prophecy* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984).

³⁴ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 150.

³⁵ J. C. McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 72—73.

³⁶ Joseph P. Brennan. "Psalms 1—8: Some Hidden Harmonies." *BTB* 10 (1980): 25—29. Cf. J. L. Mays, "The Question of Context in Psalm Interpretation," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann; Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), 19-20.

she also refuses to take a bribe--another specific, concrete act of honesty and integrity. Ironically, this wicked person says: "I shall not be moved." But Yahweh (the psalmist hopes) will say otherwise (10:12--14). In Ps 15:5, Yahweh says: "the person who does these things shall not be moved." Next, in Psalm 14 is a vivid description of the wicked person in stark contrast to the righteous person in Psalm 15, as I noted earlier in the contrast between **צַדִּיק פִּעֲלֵי אֱוֹן** (15:2) and **פִּעֲלֵי אֱוֹן**³⁷ (14:4). Again, one may note the similar contrast between 14:2 and 15:1. In 14:2 Yahweh looks down from heaven to see if anyone has insight--that is, does anyone "seek God." Evidently, no one is found—"not one" (v. 3b). In the story of Noah, no one was seeking Yahweh. The thoughts of every person were "continually evil." But then Noah found favor in the eyes of Yahweh (Gen. 6:5-8). In Psalm 14 is an equally dismal picture. In Psalm 15, however, one righteous person is found. One person is left who seeks Yahweh, asking him: Who may sojourn in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? F. Delitzsch noted this connection between these two psalms in his comments on Psalm 15: "The previous psalm distinguished from the mass of universal corruption a **צַדִּיק דֹרֶר**, and concluded with the expression of longing for the salvation out of Zion. Ps. xv answers the question: who belongs to that **צַדִּיק דֹרֶר**, and for whom is the future salvation meant?"³⁸

In 14:7, the psalmist looks forward to the return of Israel's fortunes as a time of rejoicing. The deliverance will come out of Zion, Yahweh's holy hill. This expression of hope is part of the eschatological³⁹ material that appears throughout the Psalter and which, according to Gunkel, comes from the influence of Israel's prophets. It is possible to translate 14:7b, "when Yahweh brings back the captivity of his people" or "when Yahweh brings back the fortunes of his people."⁴⁰ In either case, Psalm 15 is placed immediately after Psalm 14 by the

³⁷ For an excellent discussion and challenge of S. Mowinckel's contention that the **פִּעֲלֵי אֱוֹן** are magicians casting "spells" (which cause illnesses) upon the righteous psalmists, see Gunkel, *Introduction*, 143-47.

³⁸ Franz Delitzsch. *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (3 vols.; rev. ed., trans. David Eaton; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 1:265.

³⁹ For Gunkel, "eschatological" refers to God's ultimate victory at the end of time.

⁴⁰ For such a translation of **בִּשְׁבוּת**, see Fisch, *Jerusalem Bible and The Jerusalem Bible: Reader's Edition* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968). According to Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, abridged edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 23, this term means "captivity; a body of captives." See the detailed study by William L. Holladay, *The Root SUBH in the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), 112: ". . . most of the [occurrences] can (contextually speaking) be either ['captivity' or 'restoration']: since the meanings are after all not too far apart, and one can posit a semantic development from either to the other." Similarly, Holladay, *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 358. Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1906-7), 111: "In most of [the occurrences of this phrase] we might render, restore captivity, bring back captives; but

editor(s) of Book I in order to bolster the hope of future restoration in 14:7, whether that hope is for a return from exile or a return of better times for the people of Yahweh. When Yahweh "restores" his people, will it be possible to "sojourn" in his tent on his holy hill? Yes indeed! Moreover, Psalm 15 provides a memorable picture of what kind of person will be able to enjoy such wonderful communion with Yahweh.

In view of the other connections between Psalms 14 and 15, the possibility that Psalm 15 functions in the way that I have described deserves consideration. Gunkel pointed out the need for considering the contexts of the various psalms, although he did not have in mind "canonical contexts." He says, "There is an unbreakable principle of scholarship that nothing can be understood outside of its context. Accordingly, the particular task of psalm studies should be to rediscover the relationships between the individual songs."⁴¹ Later, he seems to think there is evidence that certain psalms are juxtaposed in order to present theological viewpoints although he can detect no overarching, unifying principle for the canonical sequence of the psalms.⁴²

I cannot detect an overall unifying theme for the entire Psalter. I find Mays's suggestion interesting but wonder if it is not too broad, too general to serve as a unifying theme for the entire collection. That is, the statement "Yahweh reigns" or "Yahweh is sovereign" seems, on one level, not much different from the statement "Yahweh is God," obviously a concept well entrenched in the Israelite psyche by the time of the psalmists. In other words, the statement "Yahweh is God" is equal in meaning to the statement "Yahweh reigns (as sovereign king)" because "God" equals "King" in the ancient Near Eastern milieu. That is, they appear to be in the same "semantic field."⁴³ I do indeed recognize, however, the

some of them must have the more general mng. restore prosperity." Compare Anderson, *Psalms*, 864: "restore one's fortune or prosperity."

⁴¹ Gunkel, *Introduction*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 335. Other scholars have sought to find a unifying principle for the entire Psalter. Recent attempts include Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS 76, ed. J. J. M. Roberts; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), who posits various organizing principles for the various groups of psalms, but not an overarching, unifying principle; James Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), especially 12-22, in which he argues for the phrase *Yhwh malak* as the center or unifying principle of the entire Psalter. The subsequent chapters trace this motif throughout the five books of collection. See also David Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (JSOTSup 252, ed. David Clines and Philip Davies; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), who sees an eschatological message as the unifying principle, and Jerome Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (JSOTSup 217, ed. David Clines and Philip Davies; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

⁴³ See Frank M. Cross, *, in TDOT, 1:245-46, 249-50, 258-59; Von Rad, *Theology*, 23-24, and John Bright, *The History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster,

prevalence of the concept of Yahweh's kingship in the Psalter. I also appreciate Mays's admission that this is but one theme in a "plurality of thought about God in the psalms."⁴⁴

Conclusion

I began this study of questioning the usefulness of postulating a reconstructed cultic setting in order to help understand Psalm 15. If this poem is read simply as a liturgical entrance psalm, we miss insights gleaned from viewing it as an important part of the theological message of the first book of the Psalter. Furthermore, we tend to minimize its semantic and conceptual links to the previous fourteen psalms in the canonical text. For example, one sees the irony of the wicked person in Ps 10:6 who boasts, "I will not be moved" versus the righteous person in Ps 15:5, upon whose behalf Yahweh boasts, "He shall not be moved." Such an intra-textual reading, including the connections of themes between Psalms 14 and 15, enriches my reading, my understanding, and my appreciation for the beauty of Psalm 15. The relationship of Psalms 15 and 16 and to the rest of the psalms in Book I is another study.

I applaud Mays for the following insights and their contribution to reading the Psalter as a book:

In the standard commentaries and introductions, psalms are taken up individually and identified as an instance of a genre, and/or as agenda for ritual performance or as artefacts of Israel's religious history. . . . The context for construal is an ideal genre and its proposed history. an inferred festival or ritual occasion. or the ancient Near Eastern history of religion. . . . When the Psalms are examined from [a contextual] perspective, questions and possibilities do appear which are not visible when the classic genres and the pre-exilic cult are used as the primary and organizing context.⁴⁵

I have suggested that we read Psalm 15 as a wisdom-influenced psalm, in the broad sense, and not just as an entrance liturgy psalm. This reading highlights the literary setting of Psalm 15 immediately following Psalm 14 as well as conceptual and linguistic links to earlier psalms in Book I. Like the wisdom (Torah) psalm that begins Book I, Psalm 15 considers the question of what kind of person may "sojourn" with Yahweh, what kind of person may be found in the "assembly of the, righteous." Both of the psalms refer to Torah, Psalm 1 explicitly and Psalm 15 implicitly by means of allusions to the Decalogue traditions. As L. Perdue successfully argued long ago, the sages of Israel were vitally concerned with and interested in worship and not just ethics.⁴⁶ It is helpful to read Psalm 15 in its

1981), 151-52, 155-56, 158, 1171.

⁴⁴ Mays, *Lord Reigns*, 22.

⁴⁵ Mays, "Question of Context," in *Shape and Shaping*, 14, 19.

⁴⁶ Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult: A Critical Analysis of the Views of Cult in the Wisdom Literatures of Israel and the Ancient Near East* (SBLDS 30; Missoula, Mont. Scholars Press, 1977), 1-11, 17, 140-226, *passim*.

reconstructed cultic origin as an entrance liturgy psalm. However, it is also helpful (especially in understanding the theological content of this psalm) to read Psalm 15 as a didactic poem—a poem that echoes the decalogical ethical traditions that were so important to those returning from exile.

Finally, a comment or two about the contemporary message of Psalm 15. Someone has observed that scholars have too often focused so much attention upon the cultic settings and original functions of the psalms that they missed the power and the beauty of its message. Psalm 15 reminds the people of God of all time periods that Yahweh's definition of "righteous living" is largely defined by ethical concerns. That is, to love Yahweh with all one's heart and to fear him demands is love our neighbors and treat them as Yahweh demands! This is taught not only by the great classical prophets of Israel but appears also in the Decalogue and in the Book of the Covenant.

The modern community of those who would seek to sojourn in Yahweh's holy presence, to live in fellowship with him must remember this and proclaim it' at all times. Unfortunately, there is too often a "gap" (if not in knowledge, at least in practice) between the worship of God and the fear of God and practical, everyday godly treatment of one's neighbor! Psalm 15 reminds us that we "shall not be moved" only if we I treat fellow human beings in an honest and godly way.

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