
As part of its mission the Yale Institute of Sacred Music supports many publications, recordings, and films written and created by its faculty; this faculty, in turn, commonly carries out its work in partnership with colleagues outside the walls of the Institute, at Yale and beyond. Psalms in Community is a work created in this collaborative spirit: the book grew out of a conference hosted by the ISM along with other Yale schools and departments, but physically located in synagogues and churches in New Haven and its environs as well. A team of scholars and practitioners planned the conference and brought the lectures and performances to hundreds of people, always intending to reach out to many more through a later publication. The book, written about a variety of communities, was produced by communities, both of learning and of faith.

In addition a film, Joyful Noise, the second in a series concerning the nature and styles of Psalm singing found in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities, will appear this fall. It joins Work and Pray, a DVD about the Psalms as lived with the nuns of Regina Laudis, Bethlehem, Connecticut. Much of Joyful Noise was shot on location during the conference, and so relates directly to the many subjects treated in the book. The scholars, performers, choirs, and congregations involved in the book and the film have prepared a feast of psalmody, inviting teachers and students, classrooms and congregations, to learn more about this great subject: the Psalms. In the future other films will appear until we have a full witness to contemporary practices of sacred song, one that will complement the historical and textual studies of the book. The conference, book, and films are supported by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

The Psalms are the great touchstone for the People of the Book. As lived texts they breathe in as many translations as there are liturgical languages, and so the Hebrew Psalms, the song book of Second Temple Judaism, have shaped practice as practice reshapes them. The masterful opening essays of the book are a study in contrast, and establish tensions sparking the entire conversation. Robert Taft’s essay documents various erosions of Christian Psalm singing in the late antique Christian world, pointing to how the texts were overwhelmed in practice by later additions and the loss of congregational proclamation, which he deems essential to using the texts as vehicles for communal prayer. Larry Hoffman finds the psalms to be the exegetical glue that grounds the dialogue between the people, their worship leaders, and God. He, like Robert Taft, longs for communal appreciation and understanding of the
process and its innate power to sustain us in a frightening and uncertain world: "with ears now deadened to textual intricacies, we moderns no longer hear the psalms as our ancestors did. They are still there . . . we rarely notice them . . . ."

The following sections of the book respond to these initial pleas for better understanding and a resurgence of attention to practice centered on the psalms. Esther Menn offers a portrait of David and the tradition of his prophetic authorship as developed in Second Temple Judaism. In his "Amazing Grace" John Collins explores the Thanksgiving Psalms of the Dead Sea Scrolls, finding them to be new compositions based on the Psalms but most likely intended for personal devotion. Patrick Miller proposes a theological framework for the canonic Psalter, and then shows how reading and praying it establishes an individual and communal doxology. Scholars who work with the Christian New Testament expand upon these ideas. Harold Attridge begins with Esther Menn's suggestion that the Psalms are the most cited portion of the Old Testament in the New, explains why this is so, and what this tells us about the worship lives of early Christians. Adela Collins then lays out an early Christology based upon the psalms and Christian use of them in practice and in thought. Diana Swancutt looks at a specific group of texts, those that invoke God as "Rock," and transports us to the world of St. Paul and the liturgical practice of psalm singing.

Essays on the way the psalms shaped both practice and theological thinking in the late antique period follow. Peter Jeffery relates how Philo's description of the worship of a first-century Jewish community, the Therapeutai, was later taken as a description of a Christian group, and so determined the nature of Christian practice in its turn. Brian Daley looks at the daily bread of Psalm singing in early Christian thought, exploring "God's music," and how it was their "sweetness" that enabled these sung texts to transform people. Bryan Spinks offers a note on the use of the Psalter of the Syriac Bible in evening prayer where it forms "the heart in pilgrimage."

From the centuries of the formation of these texts and their use by ancient peoples and communities the book takes the reader on a journey through later Christian communities. Here the editors lament that some Jewish scholars contacted to speak and write for the book were unable to be present because of illness. If they had this would not be a Christian section; medieval and early modern Judaism carried on an intense encounter with the Psalms, one we wish were studied here. My own paper on the centrality of the Psalms in Christian monastic practice puts one of its greatest practitioners, Hildegard of Bingen, back in the context of Benedictine prayer. Walter Cahn, in a paper that forms a visual counterpart to that by Brian Daley, explores the illuminations in medieval Psalter commentaries as part of a broader pedagogical agenda. This same pedagogical theme resonates in the paper of Jaime Lara with its intriguing title "Feathered Psalms." With striking visuals Lara demonstrates the ways in which the texts were brought to sixteenth-century Mexico, forcing an encounter between Old World and New, and Christian and indigenous liturgical understanding. Two papers explore various aspects of the Psalms as used for worship in Calvinist communities in Geneva. Serene Jones speaks of the reenactment of the Psalms as they become essential tools for dealing with problems of violence and chaotic displacement. Carlos Eire looks at the ways in which the ungodly are shunned in the Psalm texts and treated by worshipping communities as justification for a new "chosen" people, the Genevans, who saw themselves as the spiritual children of an ancient covenant.
The final sections of the book include case studies of contemporary practices. These are so varied that it seems best to turn to living examples of textual arts made by individuals in and for communities. Gilbert Bond describes the psalmody of an African American church in Atlanta and roots its practice in earlier traditions. Mark Kligman, an ethnomusicologist, explores the traditions of Sabbath prayer among Syrian Jews in Brooklyn, noting various styles of singing and the musical prominence of the Psalms. Alexander Lingas outlines the place of psalm singing in Byzantine liturgical traditions, and then turns to various attempts at renewal in modern practice. Richard Clifford speaks of the ways Roman Catholics have wrestled with their Psalm texts for worship, advocating a look at "register," and noting the challenge of translating a liturgical language in which male metaphors for God abound. Elliot Stevens addresses translations by looking to midrashic commentary as a way of adding new understanding yet remaining faithful to tradition. Gordon Lathrop says that the language of the Psalms in worship matters so much because of the meaning of assembly: "there is no rank here, no gender preference, no inside track." He lays out the rules followed by those who translated the psalter for the Book of Common Prayer. Peter Hawkins reveals through carefully chosen texts the great influence of the psalms on contemporary poetry, setting modern-day authors on the shoulders of great English poets, and closing with the beautiful and poignant "I (Handiwork/Glory)" by Jacqueline Osherow, who writes as a Jew whose gifts have not been silenced by the horrors of Auschwitz. She makes a new Psalm 150 for this age. Two preachers, Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig and Rev. Ellen Davis, end the collection offering commentaries on the Psalms for congregations of their own traditions.

"Taste and see," the Psalmist says. This book invites, challenges, demonstrates, and persuades, broaching a myriad of themes surrounding the one hundred fifty texts of the Psalms. The point is their centrality to both Jewish and Christian traditions. Here we see not only why this has been so, but engage with the reasons for continuing it.

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