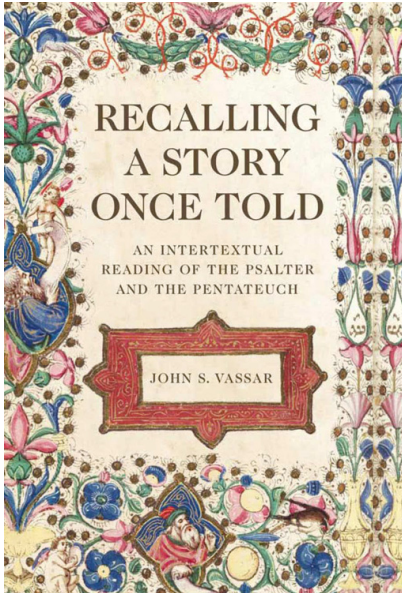


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Vassar, John S.

Recalling a Story Once Told: An Intertextual Reading of the Psalter and the Pentateuch

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This book investigates the intertextual relationship between the fivefold book of the Psalms and the fivefold book of Torah, the Pentateuch. It is not, as one might expect at first glance, a description of the connections between all the psalms and the whole Pentateuch. It is rather an exploration of the connections between five pivotal psalms and certain contexts within the Pentateuch. The five psalms are the initial psalms of each of the five books of the Psalter (Pss 1; 42; 73; 90; 107), and each of these is described as being connected to the Pentateuch in such a way that the reader traverses backward through the Pentateuch as he or she proceeds forward through the Psalms. After the introduction (ch. 1), Pss 1 and 42 are discussed in chapter 2 as having connections with Deut 30 and Num 16, respectively. Chapter 3 is dedicated to Ps 73 and its supposed special relationship with the book of Leviticus. Chapter 4 discusses how Ps 90 exhorts one to read Exod 32 again and also how Ps 107 seems to have unique connections with Gen 1. This is followed by a conclusion and implications (ch. 5).

“Intertextual” is also a word that is employed in a special sense. In contradistinction to the reader-centered and author-centered definitions of intertextuality given by Roland Barthes and Allan Bloom, respectively, the author chooses for the approach of Ziva Ben-Porat, an exponent of the Tel Aviv school of poetics, who integrated the two approaches

by focusing on allusion as a literary device rather than intertextuality as a general textual condition. According to this approach, the reader of a text often experiences a reciprocal “simultaneous activation” when a text being read evokes a reminiscence of a text already known, generating new interpretations of both texts. Markers in the text being read may trigger a connection, after which the intertextual reader examines many more patterns of correspondence between the two texts and their interpretive possibilities.

The evoked text is thus not identified arbitrarily, but with the help of a “marker,” an element or elements in the later text that guide the reader to the evoked text. This marker may or may not have been intended by the later author. Vassar takes the fivefold division of the Psalter as such a general marker that purposefully points the reader toward the Pentateuch. Since he regards the initial psalm of each book as a kind of guide for the rest of that book (7), it follows that the five opening psalms of the five books and their connections to the Pentateuch establish a strong associative field between the Pentateuch and the Psalter as a whole.

How does he identify the texts to which each of these five psalms directs our attention? He initially uses formal markers such as identical words and linguistic constructions to identify a text or texts in the Pentateuch that display the strongest connections to the particular psalm. This then leads to the identification of specific themes or ideas (or other associative devices) that link the two contexts. It is important to note that he is not looking for an absolute correlation between the two texts and that he does not argue that the particular text in the Pentateuch is the only text evoked by the particular psalm. Neither is it his contention that the author of the text intended it to refer back directly to the context that he identifies as a corresponding one.

The *modus operandi* of the author is usually to begin by discussing the text of one of the chosen psalms first in terms of its form, contents, and emphasis. In the case of Ps 1, the emphasis seems to be on the contrast between obedience and disobedience, between the righteous and the unrighteousness, and between life and death. According to Vassar, it is this emphasis that echoes a text like Deut 30:15–20. The echo then leads to formal markers that link the two texts, such as the use of “walking” as a metaphor for conduct and the mutual reference to the “destruction” of those who choose to be unfaithful to Yahweh in the two texts. These formal connections then further lead the reader to identify thematic similarities that eventually inform the reading of Ps 1. It affords the reader, for example, the opportunity to achieve literarily what the Hebrews wished to achieve literally, namely, a return to the land—to “progress backward to the most idealized time of all” (44) and so to return to the land.

The intertextual link Vassar proposes between Ps 42 and Num 16 seems to me to be less certain than the links between Ps 1 and Deut 30. He finds the marker that points toward Num 16 in the superscription of Ps 42, the first of the psalms ascribed to “the sons of Korah.” When the psalm is read alongside the Korah episode in Num 16, Vassar argues, complementary and not competitive meanings are produced. From the description of the contents of Ps 42, it becomes clear that the psalmist experiences both a social and a theological alienation. Water is described in the psalm as life-giving, but later in the psalm also as a threat, so that God is described both as succor and threat, similar to the depiction of Yahweh in Numbers, where his presence is both a source of strength and a source of danger for the community. The element of hope found in the Korah narrative is also reflected in the psalm, according to Vassar: Korah is destroyed, but his clan is later reestablished in the temple. Psalm 42 similarly ends on a note of hope when the psalmist expresses the knowledge that future praise will once again be in the presence of God.

It is especially the words “sanctuaries of God” in Ps 73 that establish a connection to the book of Leviticus, according to Vassar. This draws attention to the notion of purity that plays such an important role in both Leviticus and Ps 73. Another link is established by their central placement respectively in the Pentateuch and the Psalter. Psalm 73 summarizes Pss 1–72, but it also anticipates what is coming in the second half of the book of Psalms. Leviticus likewise forms the center of the Pentateuch. The reference to the holy areas of the temple in Ps 73 is seen as the trigger for the acquisition of a new perspective in Ps 73: “In the sanctuaries, the psalmist engages in worship along with the community of faith, in the presence of God” (105–6).

Vassar reads Ps 90 as a text that creates a conflict between the author or reader of the psalm and Yahweh. It has markers that direct the reader to a particular polarized encounter between Yahweh and the Israelites: the incident of the golden calf in Exod 32. The links Vassar sees between Ps 90 and Exod 32 is, in the first place, the connection established by the reference to Moses in the superscription. But perhaps more significantly, the command to Yahweh to “turn” and to “repent” (Ps 90:13) establishes the strongest tie with Deut 32. Remembering Deut 32 serves to offer hope to the reader of Ps 90: if Yahweh intervened on behalf of Israel in the past, perhaps he will do so again. In the words of Vassar, the psalm is “a communal lament, to plead with the deity for involvement, but it is also designed to motivate the reader to action ... to encourage the reader and the community to gain the intervention of Yahweh” (108).

Finally, Ps 107 is read together with Gen 1. The psalm narrates four scenes of salvation in various circumstances. It ends in an extended praise of God that “culminates in a command to reflect upon the covenant love of Yahweh” (113). What connects Ps 107 to Gen 1? The progress through the Psalms has suggested a backward movement through

the Pentateuch, so that Ps 107 has to have some connection to Genesis. Vassar finds this connection specifically in the fact that Ps 107 and Gen 1:1–2 “each speak the language of creation,” using the words for “chaos,” “darkness,” “the deep,” and “waters” in close proximity. Psalm 107 thus describes the saving acts of God against the backdrop of chaos, suggesting that the God of Gen 1:1–2 continues to work in the age of the author of the psalm. The twin themes of distress and deliverance permeate the whole of Genesis, so that Ps 107 reflects the hope that Yahweh still intervenes in reality and protects his creation against the threats of encroaching chaos. In this way, it is seen to provide a “significant introduction to the praise that is more typically associated with Book Five of the Psalter” (124).

Vassar is convinced that the chiasmic connection formed by the intertextual relationship between these five psalms and the Pentateuch is no coincidence but is the result of an attempt by the editors of the Psalter to “mimic the construction of the Book of Moses” (128). It would also serve to remind the reader of the Psalter about the Pentateuch, recalling the narratives of the Pentateuch in poetic form (128) and help with the interpretation of the Pentateuch (129).

What is my verdict on the success of Vassar’s attempt to relate the Psalter with the Pentateuch? I think he has done us a favor. The book is written in a very readable and entertaining style. The author presents most of his arguments very convincingly, making effective use of opinions expressed by other researchers to argue his position, so that one gets a general feeling of objectivity and sound reasoning. In a number of places I felt a strong urge to disagree, such as when he argues that the phrase “the man of God” in Ps 90:1 does not refer to Moses but should be read as a title for the psalm. On the whole, however, I think the author is right. Whether it was done by an artful editing of certain psalms or merely a careful selection of those psalms and the addition of headings, intertextual connections were established between certain psalms and the Pentateuch. But, as Vassar would readily concede, such connections extend also to other parts of the Hebrew canon, such as the Former Prophets, the Latter Prophets, and Proverbs. The connections to the Pentateuch should not detract from the fact that a web of intentional connections exist between Psalms and other parts of the canon. I am not convinced that there is an intended chiasmic relationship between certain psalms and the books of the Pentateuch. But it is certainly true that, as time progressed, the authors and editors of the book of Psalms felt an increasing urge to correlate the Psalter with the rest of the canon. It is to this theme that Vassar has made a very important contribution.