A Story of the Psalms: 
Conversation, Canon, and Congregation

V. Steven Parrish


Biography
V. Steven Parrish is an ordained Presbyterian minister who has been engaged in both full-time and part-time pastoral ministries in Tennessee. After completing his Theological Studies and gaining his PhD, he is now employed as Professor of Old Testament at Memphis Theological Seminary. This, his first Book, grew out of a series of Perry Lectures given at Bethel College in McKenzie, Tennessee, in January 1999. These lectures were particularly geared for clergy engaged in pastoral ministries in Presbyterian Congregations.

Contents
In a Story of the Psalms, as the subtitle Conversation, Canon, and Congregation indicate, Parrish develops his thesis that the Book of the Psalms narrates a story of Israel that closely parallels the history of modern Church congregations. He argues that that the Book of Psalms can be thought of as a deeply textured story that is narrated by multiple and often competing voices that moves through crucial episode or moments, in Israel’s History (vii). The stated goal of the book is to listen to this story so as “to hear a word of God to help today’s congregations in their struggle for identity and purpose (viii). It is Parrish’s contention that the Psalms tell the story of Israel’s emergence, establishment, collapse and reemergence a story remarkable similar to the experience of many congregations strugglingly to come to terms with the world of the 21st Century and facing a crisis of identity and purpose.

Chapter 1 titled, “A Story of the Psalms” gives a sound history of critical studies on the Book of Psalms and defines for the reader Parrish’s concepts of canon and congregation, and what he means by two important phrases often used throughout the text – ‘convergence of stories,’ and ‘competing voices.’ The final section of Chapter 1 outlines the author’s methodology and gives several caveats regarding topics that will not be treated in the text (11-22).

Chapters 2-5 are divided according to the paradigm that he sees at work in the Psalms that is ‘Emergence,’ ‘Establishment,’ ‘Collapse’ and ‘Reemergence.’ Earlier in the book, Parrish acknowledges that these titles are based on Walter Brugemman’s categories of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation as found in his work The Message of the Psalms (21).
The Conclusion is devoted to pulling together the fruit of his analysis. The work also contains several Indices - A Subject Index, an Authors Index and an Index of Psalms treated in the author’s analysis.

Throughout the work Parrish follows the traditional scholarly opinion that the Psalter can be readily divided into five books and he follows a carefully established pattern of systematically analysing these five Books. Each chapter begins with his assessment of selected Psalms followed by subsections entitled ‘Preliminary Observations,’ ‘Canon and Congregation’ and ‘Summary.’ He also sees that this framework converges with the story of modern Church congregations which often follows the same pattern. He therefore sees the Book of Psalms as a guide for these congregations in the challenges facing them in their own situation (16-17, 136-137).

Although Parrish’s stated aim is to apply the paradigm of Israel’s relationship with God to a modern Church context, he does not quite achieve his goal. This is due to several reasons: His loose and sometimes confused definitions of a number of important technical terms which he cites as part of his multi-disciplinary approach to his analysis of selective Psalms e.g. “synchronic”; “diachronic;” “narrative-critical methodology” or reading the Book of Psalms as story; and an established framework throughout his text that sets his analysis in the context of North American, Presbyterian congregations rather than using canonical criticism as stated. There is little reference also to his congregation’s use and interpretation of the Psalms which he has selected for analysis.

While he sets out to tell the story of the Book of Psalms as detailing the key moments of Israel’s history and relationship with God, he uses only 33 out of 150 Psalms and these key moments are often related through other books of the Old Testament rather than the Psalms chosen for analysis. Indeed his choice of Psalms is highly selective and appears to be based on what best suits his thesis rather than analyse them in the wider context of the Psalter itself.

Nevertheless, despite these major flaws there were some positives. Parrish has made an attempt to view the Old Testament through his own experience as a pastor working in a modern congregation and struggling to define its own identity and purpose as a Christian community of faith. He sees this sacred texts as offering some basic lessons in coming to a realisation of God’s continuing love and loyalty to a people not always faithful, frequently failing to live up to its calling and struggling to reciprocate the unconditional love of the God they worship. The format of the book with its use of clearly marked headings and sub headings, its illustration and its use of footnotes rather than endnotes also makes for easy reading.

Because the author addresses the work to modern Christian congregations and Presbyterian ones in particular, The Story of the Psalms: Conversation, Canon and Congregation is certainly not suited to a general readership, including Christian congregations of other denominations. It is better suited to students at a Christian Seminary of the authors own affiliation, who would find the work as a helpful complementary text in a course that studies the Psalms from a Christian perspective.

Reviewer: Good Samaritan Sister, Dr Margaret Hannan, is an Honorary Fellow with
Australian Catholic University. She is former Head of the School of Theology (ACU Brisbane) and a regular book reviewer and contributor to AEJT.