

A SCHOLARDARITY MANUSCRIPT

THE OPENING UP OF A PSALM:
The case of Psalm 126
And Psalm Therapy

Prof. Norman Gottwald

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by
Peter D.S. Krey
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The Therapy of the Psalms
and the Healing of a Person

A Guide (pages)

1. Introduction to the topic and task (3)
2. Psalm 51 and Psalm 126 and personal crisis (3-5)
3. Five interpretations of Psalm 126 (5-6)
4. Therapeutic moment then and now
5. Psalm 126 according to Knox and Weiser (7-8)
6. Classification and Typology of the Psalms (9)
7. Walter Brueggemann's work with the Psalms (9)
8. Brueggemann and Paul Ricoeur (9-14)
9. Relating Brueggemann's insights (15)
10. Claus Westermann and the pivot of the Psalm (16,18)
11. Feeling heard by God
and shifting from lamentation to praise
12. Recapitulation that appropriates insights (19-22)
13. Limiting the task of this study (22)
14. Helpful insights for the healing of Jung's
typology of the four personality disorders (23-28)
15. Four Jungian Categories: Johanna Herzog-Dürck (23-24)
16. A Chart for Schizoid, Depressive,
Compulsive, and Hysterical Disorders (28)
17. Second Recapitulation
and delineating a future task (29)
18. Provisional Matching of Psalms and Disorders (33-34)
19. Complexities involved in the sensitive match of
Psalms and their genres with psychologically
Disordered Persons
20. Tactics and Strategies in the therapeutic Process
21. BIBLIOGRAPHY (39)

PSALM 126

The Opening up of a Psalm

The Therapy of the Psalms

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The opening up of a Psalm can be a powerful therapeutic experience for a person in distress. Oftentimes the reader is helped, when he/she reads the Psalm aloud. But it is not merely the oral recital of a Psalm that reaches a person, of course, but the possibility of a certain oneness [in the distress experienced] by the reader and Psalm writer, or writers if others have added their brush strokes to the Psalm. Given a certain person, a Psalm can awaken a helpful feeling in him or her, putting a person's dilemma into so many words. In such a way, what brought comfort, catharsis, or celebration to the vibrant and living person of antiquity could touch a person these many centuries later, break a negative pattern, and open up a new perspective for his or her situation or way of life.

Perhaps some illustrative case descriptions will be helpful. In the first case, a very depressed and guilt-ridden young man of 20 years sits as always at his study desk. He walks hunched and refuses to straighten out his back. He talks with a lisp and cannot relate well with anyone. Reading Psalm 51 aloud to himself late one night, he cries and cries and feels that he can join the human race once again. In another case a minister working out his lessons, discovers how Psalm

114 jumps out with newly discovered tropes and nearly writes the sermon for him. And Psalm 126, which is the focus of this paper, will present a case in point that opened up for a very distressed young minister not once but several times.

The time that the Psalm concerned (in one interpretation) related to the exile of Israel but it was read at a time when the young minister had to go to Europe into exile. After the student movement days, he had been failed in all six areas of the practical ministry exam. He had been stricken from the list of those to be ordained. He found little acceptance in Europe, and a lot of rejection in the U.S.A. Feeling the seeming uselessness of 5 years in college, 4 years in seminary, and three years in exile - empty and wretched, an ocean of tears began to flow.

The thought welled up inside him: "What about all the promises you made - God? Where are all your promises now? It seems that I try to keep my promises, but no one seems to keep the promises they make to me. And all your teachings: if one tried to live according to them one did not seem to have a chance in this world. Following the teachings of Christ just didn't work. A person had to become more realistic and settle for less." At this time although verse 3 of Psalm 126: "The Lord has done great things for us [me]" was meaningless; the part about all those tears caught his eye. It took a few years until the minister could affirm this verse, even though people had long already begun to observe verse 2d: "The Lord has done great things for them [him]."

Restore our fortunes, O Lord! "Why am I hovering like a

helicopter that they refuse a landing pad?" So went his lament. And the gentle spirit of hope in the Psalm made an anticipation of the reality of verse 3 thinkable. And God started keeping his or her promises, and soon the minister could chime in and even feel the joy of "God has done great things for me, and am I glad." In retrospect, and after the exegesis of this Psalm, the ambiguity of the tenses in it captured the realities of his situation perfectly, because the reversals in the Psalm as well as in his life always went back and forth. But the assurance of the Psalm helped to take the edge off these set-backs.

According to the commentaries, several interpretations of Psalm 126 can be listed: A/ The old captivity interpretation, B/ a time shortly after the captivity, C/ a bad harvest in the time when the Prophet Haggai goaded the returned to rebuild the temple (ca. 520 B.C.), D/ a very prosaic pre-exilic version by Dahood, and E/ a harvest festival, possibly pre-exilic, in the face of adversities. The Hebrew, *šībāt*, was wrongly emended to *šēbūt*, which meant "captive," from *šābāh*, "to take captive." But according to Dahood,¹ it really came from *šūb*, "to restore." That takes away verse 1a's allusion to the return from captivity in Babylon. The RSV has made this update, but includes the footnote: "or brought back those who returned to Zion."² But the Hebrew expression, "turn the turning," has been shown to mean "restore the fortunes," the way it is

¹ Mitchel Dahood, *Psalms III, 101-150*, (Garden City, New York: Double Day and Co., 1970), p.218.

² Oxford Annotated Bible, p.756.

also in Job 42: 10. Even without the word "captives", most commentators still associate Psalm 126 with the return from captivity in 537 B.C., feeling that if the tenses mean that the fortunes were restored by their return, still the glowing words of the prophets describing the temple contrasted starkly with the weak community fighting for 15 years, and feeling too discouraged to tackle a new temple which would be like nothing to those who remembered, i.e., knew of the glory of the first temple (Hag. 2:3). In this case verse 4a, begging to restore the fortunes again made sense. Bad harvests are also reported in Haggai 1:6 and 2: 19.

In his interpretation and translation of the Psalm, Dahood uproots the older interpretations radically and takes the Psalm into an almost completely different direction.³ Trying to take Dahood seriously, I could not sustain reading the Psalm recast in his way. In my judgment verse 1b: "we became like the sands of the sea" seems very obscure. The region of the Negeb doesn't call sand to my mind, nor is any note of the promise to Abraham that mentions sand in the Psalm. An increase in population fits well with a fertility festival, according to G. W. Andersen,⁴ but Dahood's translation jars the context, much more in fact than: "We were like those who dream." To me this means "It's too good to be true." But Dahood feels that this does not work in the context of the Psalm.⁵

Dahood also does not solve the problem with the tenses by

³ Dahood, *op. cit.*, Pp. 217-221.

⁴ Peake's Commentary, p. 440.

⁵ Dahood, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

making them all past, completed action. He maintains that he cannot understand verse 4a begging to restore Israel's fortunes again, and changes it into a statement.⁶ The progression of the tenses can be very well understood, however, when one considers that the Psalmist felt heard and anticipates that his fortunes will be restored, even though that is still far from the case and he still prays for it.

I would concur with Arthur Weiser and his interpretation E listed above. Psalm 126 is a communal cultic song, which was composed for a harvest festival in the face of adversities.⁷ A. Weiser puts all the tenses into the present,⁸ except for using the present perfect tense for 2b and 3a: "The Lord has done great things..." But A. Weiser notes that verse 1b shows the community's hope in reminiscences of divine restorations,⁹ but then he still translates the verb in the present. I would opt for Weiser's interpretation, because for me one of the big misfortunes of Israel was definitely the captivity, and verse 6 still contains "homecoming," which is not explained by gathering the harvest while still at home. Again, I feel that the ambiguity in the tenses could have been a real representation of their anticipation of better times despite the realities.

Perhaps it is not necessary to go as far as Ronald Knox in an Alternative Translation of the Psalms: Newly translated from

⁶ Ibid., p. 220.

⁷ Artur Weiser, The Psalms, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 760.

⁸ Ibid., p. 759.

⁹ Ibid., p. 760.

Old Testament Vulgate:

When the Lord gave back Zion her banished sons, we were like men refreshed (men who dream) in every mouth was laughter, joy was on every tongue. Among the heathen themselves it was said, "What favor the Lord has shown them!" Favor indeed the Lord has shown us, and our hearts rejoiced. Our withered hopes, Lord, like some desert watercourse renew!* The men who are sowing in tears will reap, one day, with joy. Mournful enough they go, but with seed to scatter; trust me, they will come back rejoicing, as they carry their sheaves with them.

Note: *The process of deliverance is still incomplete. Verse 1 is not something that actually happened, but is an imaginary, anticipated picture.¹⁰

This is the Psalm as adapted from A. Weiser:¹¹

THOSE WHO SOW IN TEARS WILL REAP WITH SHOUTS OF JOY

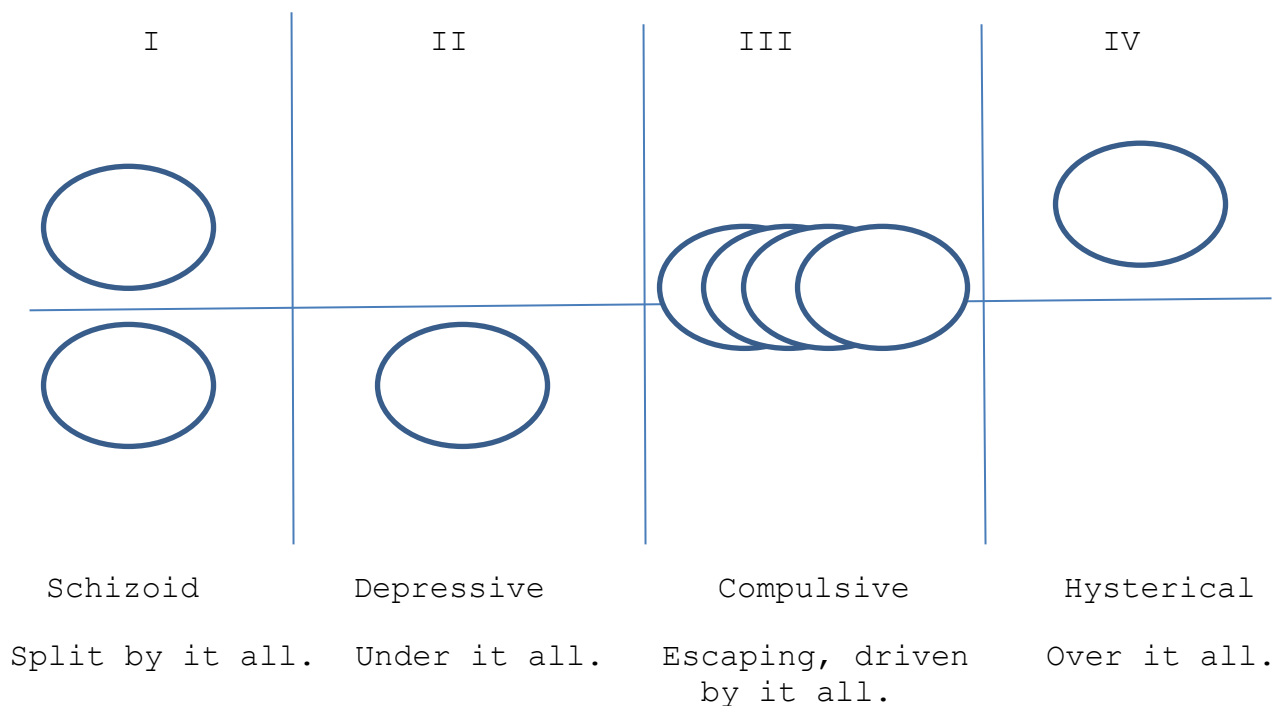
- 1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
then we were like those who dream.
- 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the Gentiles,
'The Lord has done great things for them'.
- 3 The Lord has done great things for us;
we are glad.
- 4 O Lord, restore our fortunes
like rivers in the Negeb!
- 5 Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.
- 6 They go along weeping
and sow their seed;
they come home with shouts of joy,
and bring their sheaves with them.

¹⁰ Msgr. Ronald Knox, "Alternative Version of the Psalms," *The Old Testament*. Translated from the Vulgate Latin, Vol II. (New York: Sheet and Ward Inc., 1950), p. 894.

I modernized some of Knox's English: "Sion" to "Zion" and "shewn" to "shown."

¹¹Weiser, *op. cit.*, p. 759.

CHART of the FOUR JUNGIAN PERSONALITY DISORDERS



What follows in this 40 page paper is Walter Brueggemann's typology of Psalms according to whether they are those of orientation, disorientation, or reorientation, a hermeneutical dialectic that can include life, rather than merely an intellectual dialectic like thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Then the paper grapples with what Psalms of disorientation and what Psalm combinations may be helpful or therapeutic for the Jungian personality structures that tend toward the above disorders. The long experience of what was helpful for those who suffered from those four kinds of distress is matched with relevant Psalms. Many Psalms shift from lament to praise, meaning that the Psalmist felt heard by God, and the change for the better life of promise was on the way, as illustrated by Psalm 126. Cost: \$1.99.

Peter D.S. Krey