

BRIAN BRITT
Virginia Tech

PSALM RECITATION AND POST-SECULAR TIME:
AUGUSTINE, THE IPOD, AND PSALM 90

[I]n Psalm 89[90] the one who prays the Psalm puts at the heart of his prayer one of the topics most explored by philosophy, most sung by poetry and most felt by human experience in all ages and in all the regions of the earth: human frailty and the passing of time.¹

The Book of Psalms may be the most well-used and least understood book of the Bible. Religious communities recite the psalms in traditions that extend back thousands of years, while modern scholars puzzle over the texts' history and meaning. The psalms can strike the reader as texts out of time, yet time structures their recitation and provides a central motif for some, including Psalm 90.² How did the recitation of the text in time relate to its

¹ John Paul II, "Psalm 89 [90]," http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20030326_en.html (accessed June 13, 2012). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference of the International Society for Religion, Literature, and Culture at Aarhus, Denmark on October, 2008. I wish to thank Lynn Poland and Theodore Dickinson for helpful comments on a draft of this article.

² Psalm 90 contrasts divine and human time, using six words for units and relations of time. The use of Psalm 90 in debates about the creation of the world, as a case of so-called "day-age theory," is one of the contemporary uses of the text's time language, but it does not concern me here. See Gerhard F. Hasel, "The 'Days' Of Creation In Genesis 1: Literal 'Days' Or Figurative 'Periods / Epochs' Of Time?," *Origins* 21(1994): 5-38, online at <http://ldolphin.org/haseldays.html>. (accessed June 13, 2012). No specific historical events are named in the text, and though its appeal to divine mercy (vv. 9, 11, 13) evokes Moses' prayer in Exod 32, its attribution to Moses raises more questions than it answers. Noting the striking parallels to Exod 32:10-13, Michael Fishbane notes that "It was undoubtedly in the light of such a synoptic perception of the concordance between Ps. 90 and this Pentateuchal prayer that an ancient exegete ascribed the psalm to Moses," *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 405.

expressions about time? My claim is that the dichotomy of sacred and profane time, along with the concept of linear narrative, constrains research on these issues, and that traditions of recitation and reception better illuminate time in Psalm 90 and the Book of Psalms in general. I propose the illustration of an iPod screen, which tracks the flow of time in music, as a way to conceptualize time in the tradition of recitation examined by Augustine.

Historical context is often unclear in the Psalms, but this temporal ambiguity enables the kind of recitation and reading that regards them as timeless and perennially relevant: anyone can read the Psalms at any time and find them immediately meaningful.³ It is my goal here to bring the category of recitation to bear on the question of time in psalm research. Augustine's well-known meditation on time from the *Confessions* centers on psalm recitation, a subject on which modern scholarship has little to say. By including the tradition of recitation in psalm research, I wish to complicate the conception of religion beyond the standard binary categories of sacred and profane. The main schools of biblical research, with their sharp distinction between sacred and profane time, fail to account for the composition and reception of these texts, particularly traditional practices such as recitation. Themselves "secular" in outlook, these methods project modern categories of religion and secularity back onto the biblical text in various ways, as sacred rites, secularized versions of Canaanite religion, or secular literary works.

This interest in recitation runs all sorts of methodological risks. Among these are the elusive nature of subjective experience, the boundary between the study and practice of religious tradition, the difficulty of fixing the text's meaning, and the different modes of experience within different historical and cultural settings.⁴ Nevertheless, indirect evidence of the experience and ideas of time can be found in the Bible, biblical history, and biblical reception. By studying this evidence, scholars can explore the history and structure of biblical texts together with practices and conceptual formations of biblical tradition. And although Psalm 90 and its interpretations are variable enough to support an argument for the indeterminacy of meaning, traditional practices of recitation and spatial metaphors of coherence (Ps. 90:2) lend stability to the text and its tradition. By recourse to the categories of recitation and spatial metaphors for time, this discussion of Psalm 90 and its reception thus seeks a middle path

³ Mitchell J. Dahood notes: "The timeless nature of many of the psalms makes it impossible for us now to trace the history of these collections or the process by which they were combined." (Dahood, *Psalms*, vol. 1 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966], xxxii). This quality of the Psalms was already noted by Athanasius in the fourth century; see *The Letter to Marcellinus*, in *The Life of Anthony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 109-110.

⁴ In a late essay, Walter Benjamin describes the modern experience of time in terms of "the disintegration of the aura in immediate shock experience"; but the transformation is not secularization but rather a kind of displacement. The paradoxical survival of tradition takes place in such profane texts as Baudelaire's "Loss of a Halo," and with this survival of tradition goes the experience of time and space ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 342-43 [313-55]).

between the simplicity of sacred and secular on the one hand and the indeterminacy of meaning on the other. Post-secular time, I suggest, already belongs to biblical texts and traditions.

Recitation is unfashionable in contemporary pedagogy and scholarship, but it forms a central part of traditional religious and educational practice.⁵ Recitation is a little-noticed and much-discarded feature of religious traditions, a category of practices that runs against the principles of individual expression and creativity and comes to represent, in modern theories of education for instance, the ultimate sign of backwardness and stultification. A recent article from a scholarly journal on education laments the central role of “rote memorization” in education around the world: “Such training may be useful for those who build their lives expecting others to do what they have done; it will not be useful in developing the critical-thinking skills children will need to cope in a flexible way with a rapidly changing environment.”⁶ Such portrayals depict memorization and recitation as obstacles to creativity, flexibility, and higher stages of intellectual development.

Just the opposite was true for centuries of biblical tradition, which held recitation to be a meaningful and instructive practice. Psalm recitation, according to Michael Fishbane, is rooted in the Bible and becomes central to rabbinic tradition: “Slowly the recitation moves through the ancient prayer . . . Not every word or teaching may express one’s own theology, now or ever; but, for all that, the words and teachings of the recitation belong to us—inheritors of the Mosaic community and formed by its language and values.”⁷ In his *Letter to Marcellinus*, the Alexandrian Christian Athanasius (d. 373) ascribes psalm recitation to divine command and extols its religious efficacy: “For just as we discover the ideas of the soul and communicate them through the words we put forth, so also the Lord, wishing the melody of the words to be a symbol of the spiritual harmony in a soul, has ordered that the odes be chanted tunefully, and the Psalms recited with song.”⁸ In ways that resonate with the practices of Christians and Jews elsewhere, Athanasius recommends the reading and recitation of the Psalms as a particularly valuable religious practice. The *Letter to Marcellinus* groups psalms by genres and different needs and occasions (praise, petition, confession, exhortation), and it singles out the Psalms as texts that act like a mirror for one who recites them, bringing harmony to the soul.⁹

Recitation also relates to current debates on secularism and secularization. In *Genealogies of Religion*, Talal Asad engages the history of medieval Christian monasticism as a set of “disciplinary practices” that include “the daily performance of liturgy, the reading aloud and

⁵ See, e.g., Barbara A. Holdredge, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 347-57, 387-88.

⁶ Robert J. Sternberg, “Four Alternative Futures for Education in the United States: It’s Our Choice,” *School Psychology Review* 33 (2004): 66 [66-77].

⁷ Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 135. Thanks to Theodore Dickinson for this reference.

⁸ Athanasius, *The Letter to Marcellinus*, 124-5.

⁹ Athanasius, *The Letter to Marcellinus*, 111, 125.

the hearing and memorizing of sacred texts.”¹⁰ The language and speech of these recitations constitute for Asad “a dialogical process by which the self makes (or fails to make) itself in a disciplined way.”¹¹ Such a process cannot be described simply as repressing certain desires, controlling subjects, or “inculcating” particular values. Because these practices contribute to the formation of particular desires and the embodiment of particular values, they complicate modern ways of thinking about freedom, coercion, and ritual. At the conclusion of his discussion, Asad contrasts medieval Christianity to secular modernity: “Thus humility in the form of self-abasement is no longer admired in ‘normal’ Christianity, and modern secular thought and practice classify and treat it as one of the standard personality disorders. Rituals of humiliation and abasement are now symptoms of patients, not the discipline of agents.”¹² Like other traditional religious practices, recitation appears quaint and obsolete to secularist eyes, but it actually represents a crucial dimension of biblical tradition.

I. RECITATION, RECEPTION, REFLECTION

The culture of recitation became institutionally-grounded for Christian tradition in the sixth century with Benedict’s monastic *Rule*: “The Prophet says: Seven times a day have I praised you (Ps. 118[119]:164). We will fulfill this sacred number of seven if we satisfy our obligations of service at Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline.”¹³ Psalm 90 belongs to this final recitation of the day: “At Compline the same Psalms are to be repeated every day, namely Psalms 4, 90 and 133.”¹⁴ The Christian history of Psalm recitation flourished in monastic tradition and spread to the laity as well, especially through the Breviary.¹⁵ Psalm recitation also makes up a significant part of Jewish daily, Sabbath, and festival prayer; the final verse of Psalm 90 belongs to daily prayer ritual.¹⁶ Rabbinic interpretation of Psalm 90 weaves reflections on divine creation, justice, and time together with images of prayer and ritual life.¹⁷

The tradition of recitation became foundational to the development of European ideas of the self, authority, and society. Talal Asad argues that the distinction between ritual and ordinary

¹⁰ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 125, 143.

¹¹ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 144.

¹² Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 167.

¹³ *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1982), 44.

¹⁴ *Rule of St. Benedict*, p. 46. See also Susan Boynton, “The Bible and the Liturgy,” in Boynton and Diane J. Reilly, eds., *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia, 2011), 16 [10-33].

¹⁵ Martin McNamara provides evidence not only for the early Christian monastic recitation of the Psalms but also for their place in the devotions of laity, as a tool for teaching, and as a general term for secular texts also (*The Psalms in the Early Irish Church*, Sheffield 2000, JSOT Supp 165, 357-63).

¹⁶ Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1979), 73. A sustained discussion of recitation, particularly of the Psalms, appears in Fishbane’s *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*, 48-49, 118-19, 132-45.

¹⁷ *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. 2, trans. William G. Braude (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 87-99.

action does not apply to medieval monasticism “any more than religion stands in contrast to reason or to (social) science.”¹⁸ The practices of monastic life, especially liturgy and recitation, resist these modern dichotomies, both of which extend from the dichotomy of religion and secularity. Asad’s book draws extensively from Jean LeClerq’s *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, which traces monastic culture from Benedict to the late medieval period, during which liturgy became a synthesis of “the literary techniques, religious reflection, and all sources of information whether biblical, patristic, or classical,” an elaborate culmination of the ancient tradition of recitation and the source of experiences of transcending time.¹⁹ In historically-diverse ways, recitation of the Psalms contributed to ideas and experiences of selves and memory; my suggestion is that the complex expressions and experiences of time in the Psalms and their recitation go quite far in explaining their influence.²⁰

By the late Middle Ages, the meaning of Psalm 90 derived as much from its liturgical uses as its lexical meaning. Joaquin Kuhn notes three in particular: the long tradition, preceding even Benedict, of reciting Psalm 90 at compline, the last prayer of the daily hours; its central place in the Mass for the first Sunday of Lent, one of several lectionary readings dealing with suffering and temptation; and in the liturgy for pilgrims at the beginning of their journey.²¹ In all three cases, the psalm was regarded as a kind of protection against the dangers of the devil, night, travel, and temptation; its recitation served as a kind of temporal amulet against evil. To this day, monastic recitation of Psalm 90 continues, along with the tradition associating it with protection against nocturnal danger.²² Magical powers have also been associated with the Psalms in Jewish Kabbalah; *Sefer Shimmushei Tehillim* is widely circulated text that may have influenced Christian tradition as well, including African-American hoodo.²³

¹⁸ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 167.

¹⁹ LeClerq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 250-251.

²⁰ The shift away from binary understandings of time also has political implications. Building on Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, Ananda Abeysekara pursues the political implications of the insight that for Marx and democracy, “time is out of joint.” Abeysekara adopts Derrida’s notion of specter or ghost to consider the problem of time: “They [ghosts] do not belong to time; if they belong to time they cannot haunt,” in *The Politics of Postsecular Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 215. Under such conditions, it becomes possible to conceive of “forgetting as a political possibility” (216) and to ask, “Can democracy live without history?” (226). A broader discussion of this question would, I suggest, relate political categories such as democracy to terms grounded in biblical tradition, such as messianism.

²¹ Joaquin Kuhn, “The Function of Psalm 90 in Thomas More’s *A Dialogue of Comfort*,” *Moreana* 22 (1969): 62-64 (61-67).

²² Personal communication, Rev. John Hagemann, O.S.B., June 22, 2010.

²³ See http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0011_0_10514.html and <http://www.luckymojo.com/secretspsalms.html> (accessed June 13, 2012). Moshe Idel suggests that the magical tradition influenced Paul Celan’s 1963 poem “Psalm,” with its references to creation from dust and the verb that can be translated “incant” or “conjure” (bespricht); *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 194-95.

Early modern reception of the Psalms took many forms. In only a slight exaggeration of the Psalms's influence, Hannibal Hamlin claims:

Virtually every author of the period (Shakespeare, Spenser, Bunyan, Donne, Herbert, and Jonson) translated, paraphrased, or alluded to the Psalms in their major works. In fact, the translation, or 'Englishing,' of the biblical Psalms substantially shaped the culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, resulting in creative forms as diverse as singing psalters, metrical psalm paraphrases, sophisticated poetic adaptations, meditation, sermons, commentaries, and significant allusions in poems, plays, and literary prose.²⁴

Yet even as their influence expanded into the literary and political landscape, the Psalms, like the Bible in general, would proliferate competing translations and uses, both within and outside religious institutions. As Jonathan Sheehan shows in *The Enlightenment Bible*, the post-Reformation vernacular Bible was pressed into new kinds of literary, historical, and pedagogical service, eventually participating in the formation of new kinds of religion and culture.²⁵ Practices of recitation had by no means disappeared from the scene, but they were certainly less homogeneous and culturally-normative after the Reformation, and by the eighteenth century, it was possible to sever abstract thought about time from embodied practices of recitation. John Wesley's sermon on eternity and Psalm 90 echoes some of Augustine's concerns but could be mistaken for a work of eighteenth-century philosophy: "But what is time? It is not easy to say . . . We know not what it properly is. We cannot well tell how to define it. But is it not, in some sense, a fragment of eternity, broken off at both ends?"²⁶ For its reflection on the meaning and brevity of human life, Psalm 90 has also served as a standard text in funeral liturgies in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* and Russian Christianity.²⁷

There is no doubt that one strand of Psalm 90 reception veers toward abstract reflection on the nature of divine time. Even before Augustine, the reference to one thousand years in v. 4 inspired such reflection in 2 Peter: "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, and some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:8-9). Francis Bacon's very free 1625 translation of the same verse also bears the imprint of post-biblical theology: "One God thou wert, and art, and still shall be;/The line of time, it doth not measure thee" (v. 2b).²⁸ Augustine's commentary

²⁴ Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

²⁵ Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁶ John Wesley, "On Eternity," *Sermon 54* (text from the 1872 edition - Thomas Jackson, editor) online at: <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/54/> (accessed June 13, 2012).

²⁷ John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 21; John Ker, *The Psalms in History and Biography* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1886), 116-19.

²⁸ Laurance Wieder, ed., *The Poet's Book of Psalms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 137.

on v. 2 reflects on the eternity of God and relates it to the divine name in Exodus 3: "There is no 'was' or 'will be' in God, but only 'is.' This is why God said *I AM WHO I AM*."²⁹

But recitation forms another strand of psalm reception, and it is a paradox that an important site of this tradition is modern classical and jazz music, which ordinarily prizes novelty, secularity, and originality. In addition to religious practices of spoken recitation, the history of reception is rich with musical settings of the Psalms, including Psalm 90, that extend into the modern period.³⁰ Examples include Ralph Vaughn Williams, "Lord Thou Has Been Our Refuge (Psalm 90)" (1921) for choir, organ, and trumpet; Igor Stravinsky's "Symphony of Psalms" (1930) for small orchestra and choir; and Steve Reich, "Tehillim" (Hebrew for Psalms, 1981) for voices. Charles Ives composed a distinctive treatment of Psalm 90 (1893-94, rewritten 1923-24).³¹ Ives' wife, Harmony, reportedly said that Ives considered it the only work with which he was satisfied.³² One of the piece's key formal features is its combinations of distinct leitmotifs, which Ives introduces and names in the first four measures: "The Eternities," "Creation," "God's Wrath against Sin," "Prayer and Humility," and "Rejoicing in Beauty and Work."³³ The heart of the composition is the rendering of the central verse of his text: "For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told" (v. 9 from the King James Version). In this passage, which Philip Lambert describes as "producing a whole-tone cluster wedge that expands and then contracts," Ives placed numbers above the score to indicate a rhythmic pattern in which "[t]he durations of the sonorities decrease by one sixteenth up to the midpoint and then return to their starting point."³⁴ Highly-structured by these leitmotifs and rhythmic patterns, Ives's "Psalm 90" brings distinctive compositional methods to a traditional text. The choral setting of the piece and its culmination in the words of verse 9 ("we spend our years as a tale that is told") suggest an interest in the finite expression of religious experience through the musical recitation of words.

²⁹ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 73-98*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine* trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B., pt. 3, vol. 18 (New York: New City Press, 1990), 304-305.

³⁰ A list of church hymns that quote or render Psalm 90 appears online at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/sca/Psalms.htm> (accessed June 13, 2012).

³¹ An online program from the Boston-area group Musica Sacra describes the "dramatic crux of the piece: the phrase 'For all our days are passed away in thy wrath; we spend our years as a tale that is told.' Ives starts the men and women on a unison C, then moves the men's parts down and the women's parts up by whole steps as the phrase progresses, always leaving one voice part on the previous pitch until there are 22 different voice parts singing the word 'wrath.' As he expanded the chord so does he contract it, having it regress back to the unison C on the word 'told' in exact palindromic motion. It is a startling image of man's insignificance in the presence of God." Online at <http://www.musicasacra.org/content.php?page=030902&n=2&f=2> (accessed July 18, 2010).

³² Jan Swafford, *Charles Ives: A Life With Music* (New York: Norton, 1996), 347.

³³ Swafford, *Charles Ives*, 346; see also Donald Grantham, "A Harmonic 'Leitmotif' System in Ives's Psalm 90," *In Theory Only* 5 (1979): 3-14.

³⁴ Philip Lambert, *The Music of Charles Ives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 60-61. I wish to thank Philip Lambert for his suggestions on this section.

John Coltrane's "Psalm" on *Love Supreme* (1964) is the fourth movement of a composition for jazz quartet featuring Coltrane on saxophone. In a musical form best known for improvisation, this carefully-controlled piece features a chant-like, recitative style; Coltrane's playing corresponds to the words of a prayer that appear in the album's liner notes. Ashley Kahn writes, "Coltrane's hushed delivery sounds deliberately speech-like: he hangs on to the ends of phrases, repeats them as if for emphasis. He is in fact 'reading' through his horn. . . . His plan was to sound the words through his saxophone."³⁵ The poem and its musical setting incorporate parallelism and repetition as biblical psalms do. The phrase "thank you God" acts as a kind of repeated refrain, and the text alternates between declarative statements of praise ("He is gracious and merciful"), words of petition ("Help us to resolve our fears and weaknesses"), and statements of commitment ("I will do all I can to be worthy of thee O Lord").³⁶ Coltrane's "Psalm" brings modern aesthetics full circle from a commitment to secular artistic invention, autonomy, and freedom—Coltrane is associated with "free jazz"—to a sacred music defined by a tradition of recitation.

Both strands of reception, reflection on time and recitation in time, relate the present to the past through biblical texts. The two strands are intertwined in Psalm 90 as they are in Augustine and throughout the history of reception, even in modern art music, which typically prizes originality over innovation, novelty over repetition. The diversity of musical psalms, including renderings of Psalm 90, certainly continues the centuries-old tradition of psalm recitation.

II. AUGUSTINE AND THE IPOD

Augustine lived during the period studied by Pierre Hadot, whose work demonstrates how practices of reading and commentary inform not only the biblical tradition but also Greek and Roman philosophy; for thinkers of this period, life and thought go together.³⁷ In his introduction to Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Arnold Davidson discusses Hadot's reading of *Confessions* as a work that integrates "conceptual structure" and "literary structure"; and "autobiography," a form that combines the "beginnings of the modern self," with theology and exegesis.³⁸ This combination does not mean that *Confessions* straddles the ancient past of biblical culture and the modern future of three-dimensional selfhood. It means instead that new ideas of self and self-expression in *Confessions* coexist with and are even constituted by practices of

³⁵ Ashley Kahn, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album* (New York: Viking, 2002), 123. Thanks to Carter Turner for this reference.

³⁶ Coltrane, "A Love Supreme," facsimile manuscript in Kahn, *A Love Supreme*, overleaf pages.

³⁷ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), esp. 81-144; and Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, trans. Marc Djaballah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Hannah Arendt also seeks to resolve the paradox of living in time and thinking about it through a notion of "timeless time" or *nunc stans*, which enables human transcendence of time without escaping time. What is missing from the secularist Arendt's account is a discussion of community or tradition. See Arendt, *Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 209-210.

³⁸ Davidson, Introduction, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 17-19.

textual reading, recitation, and exegesis. In Kenneth Burke's terms, Augustine regards biblical and Roman literature as "equipment for living."³⁹

Though Augustine did comment on Psalm 90, my concern here is to discuss the more general (and neglected) issue of psalm recitation in his theory of time. Book 11 of his *Confessions* is famous for its discussion of time and memory, but its recurring question is how to interpret the first phrase of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Augustine's meditation on the question leads him to ponder the contradiction between divine and human experience and his role in explicating it: "If only men's minds could be seized and held still! They would see how eternity, in which there is neither past nor future, determines both past and future time."⁴⁰ Quoting Psalm 102:27 and probably alluding to Psalm 90, Augustine reflects on divine time:

'[Y]ou are unchanging, your years can never fail.' Your years neither go nor come, but our years pass and others come after them, so that they all may come in their turn. . . . Your years are one day, yet your day does not come daily but is always today, because your today does not give place to any tomorrow nor does it take the place of any yesterday. Your today is eternity. (*Confessions*, 263)

Scholars have taken little notice of the role of the Bible in this discussion.⁴¹ Of course, the book's concern for scripture is overdetermined: the book is rich with biblical quotations, especially from the Psalms, and Augustine's long invocation and petition for divine help evokes scripture in a way that recalls the famous scene of reading in Book 8: "Open to me the pages of your book" (*Confessions*, 254). Augustine's use of the Psalms reflects a culture of habitual recitation whereby the text becomes internalized and even a part of the self, yet as Peter Brown notes, Augustine's use of the Psalms in *Confessions* was original.⁴² For Augustine, Psalms provide not only a rich means of expressing ideas; they also provide the doctrine and practices of recitation as the paradigm of time. Psalms he quotes for the doctrine of time include Pss. 30:11, 38:6, 73:16, 101:28; he also cites Pss. 32, 72, 79, 115, and 118.

To describe the experience of time, Augustine turns to recitation:

³⁹ Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1941), 293-304.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 262. Hereinafter cited in the text as *Confessions*.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Mark Curry, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction, and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); and Simo Knuuttila, "Time and Creation in Augustine," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* eds., Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 103-115.

⁴² Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: 1967), 174.

If a man wishes to utter a prolonged sound and decides beforehand how long he wants it to be, he allows this space of time to elapse in silence, commits it to memory, and then begins to utter the sound. . . . All the while the man's attentive mind, which is present, is relegating the future to the past. The past increases in proportion as the future diminishes, until the future is entirely absorbed and the whole becomes past. (*Confessions*, 277)

Augustine then applies this abstract model to psalm recitation in particular:

Suppose that I am going to recite a psalm that I know. Before I begin, my faculty of expectation is engaged by the whole of it. But once I have begun, as much of the psalm as I have removed from the province of expectation and relegated to the past now engages my memory, and the scope of the action which I am performing is divided between the two faculties of memory and expectation, the one looking back to the part which I have already recited, the other looking forward to the part which I have still to recite. But my faculty of attention is present all the while, and through it passes what was the future in the process of becoming the past. . . . What is true of the whole psalm is also true of all its parts and of each syllable. It is true of any longer action in which I may be engaged and of which the recitation of the psalm may only be a small part. It is true of a man's whole life, of which all his actions are parts. It is true of the whole history of mankind, of which each man's life is a part. (*Confessions*, 278)

Psalm recitation provides a model for human life as a time-bound constellation of actions and memories; the psalms' form and content merge to make their recitation an analogy for time itself.

The reciting Augustine is like the conductor of an orchestra who must, often without aid of a written score, anticipate what comes next in a piece in order to give direction on dynamics, tempo, and coloring. A more current analogy is the user of an iPod who listens to a familiar piece of music and may view the amount of time that has passed and how much remains in a piece of music as it plays (see illustration). This visual diagram is so familiar and widespread that its significance is taken for granted. Is the visual mapping of time something intuitive to most iPod users? Does the graphic enhance the experience of listening? Do listeners anticipate particular sections of a piece by means of the diagram? How does the iPod or conductor example compare to Augustine's recitation? Except for cases of the first playing of a song, all three cases involve the unfolding of a familiar work in time. In both cases, there is no way to understand the past and future apart from a present orientation to them both. Insofar as the iPod encourages the repetition of familiar experiences, it approximates the kind of recitation described by Augustine.



The example of the iPod also illustrates the metaphor of space for time, a metaphor so common it is often overlooked. The modern idea that time can be measured, subdivided, and mapped much like space has become second-nature in a world structured by calendars and clocks. In *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, Roman Ingarden associates the space-as-time analogy with memory in ways that echo Augustine, though with Ingarden as well as other scholars who study literary experience, the experience of reading *for the first time* occupies more attention than the activity of *recitation*.⁴³ In Psalm 90:2, for example, the term *’ōlām* (“world”) can mean “eternity” or “age” and parallels the phrase “the earth and the world” (*’ereṣ wə tēbēl*): large space metaphorically represents a long span of time. In rhetorical terms, the text petitions God to acknowledge human time in contrast to the large scale of divine time.

The spatial dimension of psalms includes how texts are conceptualized, recorded, transmitted, and recited in writing. For a psalm, like other canonical texts, is described not so much as a point in time, a “then,” as a point in space, a “there.” As canonical text, the psalm becomes a document widely available for reading, commentary, and recitation; it occupies space and earns a prominent place in biblical tradition. Spatial stability, through writing, creates space, so to speak, for the temporal complexity of the psalms. For biblical tradition, the Psalms are always physically embodied in a Psalter, Breviary, Bible, or amulet.⁴⁴ Written transmission allows, and even encourages, a process of reflection on their temporal complexity. As Paul Ricoeur, citing Kant, says, the symbol gives rise to thought; in this case, the written tradition of the psalms gives rise to reflection on ideas and experiences of time.⁴⁵

For Augustine, the use of recitation to illustrate the workings of memory indicates circular reasoning, since the practice of recitation in some way constitutes his understanding of memory in the first place. Practices of textual recitation in early Christianity and Judaism share this link between time and recitation; in Benedict’s *Rule*, for example, recitation of psalms marked particular times of day. In a culture of recitation, memory of the text becomes memory *as text*.⁴⁶

⁴³ Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 108-113.

⁴⁴ Amulets of the Psalms in late antiquity and the Middle Ages performed a range of apotropaic and propitiatory functions. See Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 84-86.

⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 352.

⁴⁶ See Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982) and Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

For texts like Psalm 90 in which, for example, a thousand years for God are like “a watch in the night” (v. 4), recitation *in* time reflexively mirrors recitation *about* time. To recite Psalm 90, with its multiple mentions and measures of time, especially at an appointed time in a liturgical context, is thus to engage several competing, simultaneous models of time. Recitation can also be religiously efficacious.⁴⁷ Claus Westermann identifies a continuity between past deliverance, present lament, and future deliverance in the Psalms: “Recalling history had the immediate purpose of influencing history.”⁴⁸

III. DESIRE, BUT NOT “AS A TALE THAT IS TOLD”

Augustine’s understanding of time implies the presence of desire, which structures our anticipation of the future. As an object or practice available in time, the psalm is “there,” beyond complete control but close enough to be brought “here.” Like Freud’s game of “*fort...da*” in which a child casts away and recovers physical objects, there is pleasure in the loss and recovery of a text.⁴⁹ The desire and pleasure associated with psalm texts—anticipation, possession, recitation, commentary—offer ways to experience time and go quite far in explaining their traditional appeal.

Modern narrative theory shows how the pleasure of a text relates to the reader’s or listener’s anticipation. Despite its genre, Psalm 90 offers a test case for this approach to narrative, since its topic is time and since one of its most famous mistranslations speaks of life “as a tale that is told.” The narrative turn in Psalm 90 offers occasion to examine the link between desire and narrative and opens up the possibility of locating literary desire in other literary forms and experiences. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks describes narration as a “form of human desire” in the classic case of *1001 Nights*:

Desire becomes reinvested in tellings of and listenings to stories, it is reconstituted as metonymy—over a thousand and one nights—until the Sultan can resume a normal erotic state, marrying Shahrazad, who thus fulfills her name as ‘savior of the city.’ Narration, in this allegory, is seen to be life-giving in that it arouses and sustains desire, ensuring that the terminus it both delays and beckons toward will

⁴⁷ See Athanasius, above. Michael Fishbane has documented the early rabbinic idea that Torah recitation and study can perform the same religious function as sacrifice: “Aspects of the Transformation of Sacrifice in Judaism,” in *Sacrifice, Scripture, and Substitution* eds., Ann W. Astell and Sandor Goodhart, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 114-39.

⁴⁸ Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 220-21.

⁴⁹ Thanks to Lynn Poland for this insight and for many valuable comments that contribute to my thinking in this essay. She has compared Augustine’s notion of allegory to the *fort-da* game: “Augustine’s pleasure, like that of the child’s game, and like the joyful recoveries of lost coin and prodigal son, is a gain that requires the negative moment of potential loss; it is the pleasure of anxiety provoked and mastered, with the degree of pleasure proportionate to the anxiety overcome.” (Poland, “Augustine, Allegory, and Conversion,” *Literature and Theology* 2 [1988]: 46 [37-48]).

offer what we might call a lucid repose, desire both come to rest and set in perspective.⁵⁰

Brooks's account of narrative desire derives from Freud's account of conflicting instincts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in which acts of narration stand between the pleasure principle and the death instinct: "One must have the arabesque of plot in order to reach the end."⁵¹ Brooks associates narration with repetition and, in the image of Shahrazad, the delay of death: "It is the role of fictional plots to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading."⁵² This economy of repetition depends not so much on innovation as recitation: "Repetition, remembering, reenactment are the ways in which we replay time, so that it may not be lost. We are thus always trying to work back through time to that transcendent home, knowing, of course that we cannot. All we can do is subvert or, perhaps better, pervert time: which is what narrative does."⁵³ The repetition Brooks associates with narrative, though, applies even more characteristically to liturgical poetry like the Psalms: "One must tell and tell again, hoping that one's repetition will in turn be repeated, that one's voice will re-echo."⁵⁴ In Augustine's terms, the tension we face living between past and future entails a desire for future recitation, for a continuation, if not resolution, of the Psalms. Narrative has no monopoly on literary dynamics of pleasure and death, postponement and resolution.⁵⁵

In fact, traditional recitation can offer the kind of pleasure and comfort Brooks associates with narrative, even in the face of death. In Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*, the main character recalls her late mother's use of a popular nineteenth-century recitation schoolbook called *McGuffey's Fifth Reader*, the kind of educational tool that has largely been abandoned today. Blind and bed-ridden, the mother would ask her daughter to read from the volume, and when the daughter does so again after her mother's death, it falls open to Southey's poem, "The Cataract of Ladore," and she "could imagine every word on the page being recited in her mother's voice. . . . Whatever she recited she put the same deep feeling into."⁵⁶ Welty's narrative depicts recitation as a comfort for a dying adult and to the daughter who later mourns her.

⁵⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1984), 60-61.

⁵¹ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 107.

⁵² Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 109.

⁵³ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 111.

⁵⁴ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 263. Burcht Pranger discusses the category of desire in relation to modern fiction and the confessing voice, but not recitation in "Augustine and the Silence of the Sirens," *Journal of Religion* 91 (2011): 64-77.

⁵⁵ In spite of Augustine's example of psalm recitation, scholars continue to focus on narrative as the genre of choice in discussions of time. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. Kathleen Maclaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-85) and M.B. Pranger, "Time and Narrative in Augustine's 'Confessions,'" *Journal of Religion* 81 (2001): 377-93 (esp. 387-89).

⁵⁶ Welty, *The Optimist's Daughter* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 146-7.

Desire and pleasure have permeated literary theory since Plato, but it is poetry rather than narrative that concerns many ancient thinkers.⁵⁷ Augustine, who combines Platonic and Christian thought, is famously ambivalent toward the pleasures of poetry.⁵⁸ In Book 6 of his treatise on Music, Augustine makes an abrupt transition from the fleshly domain of Greek and Latin poetry and meter to an explicitly Christian discourse:

[W]e only thought it [the earlier discussion] ought to be undertaken so adolescents . . . might with reason guiding be torn away, not quickly but gradually, from the fleshly senses and letters it is difficult for them not to stick to, and adhere with the love of unchangeable truth to one God and Master of all things who with no mean term whatsoever directs human minds.⁵⁹

For Augustine, musical and poetic pleasure carries the potential for harm or good, depending on whether one's soul is devoted to God: Quoting Psalm 33:9 ("taste and see, since the Lord is sweet," Augustine explains, "For the love of temporal things could only be dislodged by some sweetness of eternal things," which allows for the "forgetfulness of secular vanities and phantasms."⁶⁰ Recitation shifts attention from the verbal form of the text to the transcendent experience of the divine. The "temporal things" of poetry serve as a kind of ladder to be climbed and then kicked away by the devout reciter of texts. The harmony of words can be embraced only temporarily on the way to securing the higher harmony of divine love. Such a model of recitation has little to offer the scholar of biblical poetry, who may be inclined to retreat from the engagement with Augustine's recitation to more familiar scholarly modes. But one need not follow Augustine down (or up) the neo-Platonic path in considering the category of recitation. Rather, recitation provides scholars with probably the most important mode of transmission and experience of the Psalms in biblical history. The meaning of these texts does not depend so much on their "original" meaning, which preoccupies scholars

⁵⁷ Poland notes that "speaking and reading," along with narrative, constitute ways for Augustine of navigating between human time and eternity: Poland, "Invocation as Interruption in Augustine's *Confessions*," in Mary Gerhart and Anthony C. Yu, eds., *Morphologies of Faith: Essays in Religion and Culture in Honor of Nathan A. Scott, Jr.* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 356-7 (343-57).

⁵⁸ Noting the pleasure of comparing the beautiful teeth of a woman in Song of Songs 4:2 to the Church and its saints, Augustine asks, "why it seems sweeter to me than if no such similitude were offered in the divine books," but he does not answer this question. See *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978), 37-8. Thanks to Lynn Poland for this reference.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *On Music*, trans. Robert C. Taliaferro, in *Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 2 (New York: Cima, 1947), 324.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *On Music*, 373. Augustine proposes a Latin verse, "Deus creator omnium," that unites his passion for poetry and theology; it "sounds with the harmony of number not only to the ears, but even more is most pleasing in truth and wholeness to the soul's sentiment" (*On Music*, 376). These numbers, or elements of music and poetry, come in different forms, ascending in Platonic fashion from ordinary sound through memory and the standards of judgment to the angels and, finally, God. See David Goldman, "Sacred Music, Sacred Time" *First Things* November 2009, 12 pages, online at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/10/sacred-music-sacred-time> Page

disproportionately, but on how they fit into a set of repetitive practices in a long-standing tradition.

Modern literary criticism, independent of Augustine's theological commitments, might be expected to affirm the unadulterated pleasures of literature. But this pleasure echoes Augustine's ambivalence. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, literary theorist Roland Barthes meditates on the "bliss" or "pleasure" (*jouissance*) of literature but warns that "No significance (no bliss) can occur, I am convinced, in a mass culture . . . for the model of this culture is petit bourgeois."⁶¹ When it does take place, though, Barthes's pleasure suspends ordinary time, making the reader "an anachronic subject, for he simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture."⁶² This "anachrony" is not the same as Shahrazad's delay tactic of using literature as a way to pass the time. Rather, Barthes's subject is stepping outside ordinary time by reading the text of "jouissance." With Barthes as with many biblical scholars, there is a "secular" bias toward self-satisfaction and novelty, but this aesthetic itself descends from religious tradition. We can therefore say that Barthes's notions of anachrony and *jouissance*, though seemingly secular, belong indirectly to biblical tradition.

But narrative is not always the object of desire; on the contrary, early modern translations of Psalm 90 famously depict narrative as a symbol of the futility of existence. Verse 9 of the King James translation reads, "For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told." The translation here of *hegeh* as "tale that is told" follows Jerome's Latin translation of the Psalms, *Psalterium juxta Hebraeos*, which differs from the Vulgate.⁶³ The King James Version, still widely used today, reduces life to *mere* narrative; the passive "tale that is told," like the days "passed away in thy wrath," drains narrative *and* life of the very desire they are given by modern literary theory. It is therefore striking that the King James Version of Psalm 90:9 influenced the well-known words of Shakespeare's Macbeth upon the death of his spouse:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,

⁶¹ He continues in a biblical vein: "It is characteristic of our (historical) contradiction that significance (bliss) has taken refuge in an excessive alternative: either in a mandarin *praxis* (result of an *extenuation* of bourgeois culture), or else in an utopian idea (the idea of a future culture, resulting from a *radical, unheard-of, unpredictable* revolution about which anyone writing today knows only one thing: that, like Moses, he will not cross over into it)," Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 38-39.

⁶² Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 14.

⁶³ Jerome translates the final clause of v. 9 thus: "Consumpsimus annos nostros quasi sermonem loquens," in contrast to the more widely-adopted Vulgate which oddly translates *hegeh* as "aranea," "spider's web": "Anni nostri sicut aranea meditabuntur." Augustine takes spider to refer to a short life of "weaving" "corruptible works" ("corruptibilia opera texebamus"). Jerome's "sermonem loquens" became Luther's "geschwetz" and Coverdale's "tale that is told." Marbury B. Ogle, "'As A Tale That is Told,'" *Monatshefte für Deutschen Unterricht* 37 (1945): 134 [130-134].

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
 To the last syllable of recorded time,
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing. (*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 5)

Shakespeare's use of Psalm 90 indicates an early modern association of time and narrative with general reflection on the meaning of life and death. Life is insignificant, a mere "tale told by an idiot." Like Psalm 90, *Macbeth's* speech contrasts short units of time (hours and days) with longer ones (a lifetime), and both texts share elements of lament as well. But for Shakespeare, Psalm 90 offers an occasion to reflect on time and life in general terms, outside the covenantal context of the psalm, which ends with a petition for divine compassion. The suggestive phrase "as a tale that is told" mistranslates the Hebrew of Psalm 90:9b (which NRSV renders "our years come to an end like a sigh"), but it illuminates an early modern strain of thought, perhaps ironically provided by Shakespeare, that depreciates words and stories at the expense of reality. While stories sometimes provide a way to cope with the burdens of passing time, they can also serve to symbolize the tedium and futility of life. As a poetic text, the King James Version of Psalm 90, along with Shakespeare's allusion to it, implies the priority of one genre over another and the suggestion that poetic recitation can be more life-sustaining than storytelling.⁶⁴

IV. READING PSALM 90

The study of the Psalms requires attention to their structure: parallel lines, often couplets, feature repetition and semantic or phonetic types of parallelism; the overall structure of many psalms is also marked by *inclusio* or a kind of repetitive framing. In Psalm 29, for instance, the term "voice" (*qôl*) appears seven times, and there is a frame-like repetition of the term "glory" (*kābôd*) in vv. 1-3 and later in v. 9. These repetitions mark the temporal experience of recitation and form part of a literary structure that the reader or reciter may anticipate, experience, and reflect upon.

Regular repetitions also appear in Psalm 90, which features ten instances of the terms "day," "night," and "morning," and four instances of the term "year." (See the Appendix for the full text of Psalm 90.) The psalm overall moves from a statement of divine transcendence in space and time to a contrast between divine and human perspectives, statements of divine judgment,

⁶⁴ The complete literary reception of Ps. 90 would be the subject of another study, but one brief reference appears in Bertolt Brecht's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. See Gunter G. Sehm, "Moses, Christus und Paul Ackermann: Brechts *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*," in *Brecht-Jahrbuch 1976* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), 88-89 [83-100].

and resolution in the form of human petitions to the divine. The psalm also exhibits a circular structure; Erich Zenger regards Psalm 90 as a concentric structure with vv. 11-12 at the center linking the two halves of the text, and an *inclusio* in vv. 1b-2 and 17.⁶⁵

A brief analysis of the psalm, with emphasis on the dimension of time, follows:

- V. 1 is a kind of thesis statement, that God is “our dwelling place from generation to generation”
- V. 2 restates the thesis in terms of space – the earth, and world (*’ôlām*)
- Vv. 3-6 elaborate the divine-human contrast
- Vv. 7-8 mark a transition to divine judgment beginning with the word “for”
- Vv. 9-11 mark a second transition to time and divine judgment, also beginning with “for”
- Vv. 12-17 mark a third transition to a petition for divine teaching about time
- Vv. 16-17 juxtapose divine and human activity.

There are close parallels/repetitions in vv. 5-6; 7, 9 & 11; 8-9; 13-15 (phonetic); 13-15; and 16-17. Forms of the term “turn away” or “repent” occur in vv. 3 (*šûbû*) and 13 (*šûbâ*). “Day” words (including “night” and “morning”) appear in vv. 4, 5, 6 (2), 9, 10, 12, 14 (2), 15; and “year” appears in vv. 4, 9, 10, and 15. Matitiah Tsevat argues to retain “morning” in v. 5 on the grounds that it anticipates the repetition and resolution in v. 14.⁶⁶ Other words for time appear in vv. 1, 2, and 13.

The psalm’s shift from statements to exhortations (jussives) and questions has led to discussion of its purpose and genre.⁶⁷ Robert Alter and Mitchell Dahood both regard the contrast between

⁶⁵ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld et al. *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2005), pp. 416-25.

⁶⁶ Matitiah Tsevat, “Psalm XC: 5-6,” *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985): 115-16.

⁶⁷ Westermann sees the text as a lament that becomes a petition (*Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 184, n. 51). Gunkel argues that it is “woven together by hymnic and general complaint attitudes has been expanded by a communal complaint (cf. 90:13-17)” (Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 95). Mowinckel also finds diversity of form: “The backbone of it is the deliverance and re-establishment of Israel; all the other benefits follow on from the prayer for deliverance from foreign tyranny” (222). Zenger regards the first half, vv. 1b-12, as an earlier wisdom lament supplemented later by vv. 13-17 (Frank-Lothar Hossfeld et al. *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, 418-20).

divine and human time to be its focus.⁶⁸ In the background of both scholars' views is a philosophical tradition of reflection on the problem of time, an influential and early case of which is Augustine's reading of the text as an appeal to turn away from worldly time to eternity. Neither discusses how repeated words *for* time form patterns *in* time. Yet frequent reading or recitation of the text would make the psalm's patterns clear as a structure and as an experience in time. Richard J. Clifford, by contrast, classifies Psalm 90 as a "communal lament."⁶⁹ As such, Psalm 90 does not protest against the human condition; rather, it appeals to God to turn back from wrath to restore the relationship with the people. The question "how long" does not refer to lifespan but to divine wrath. W. Dennis Tucker reads Psalm 90 as a communal lament that leads to reconciliation with God: "The petition to 'number our days,' then, does not signal a note of introspection or reflection, but more radically, it signals a note of hope."⁷⁰ The attention Clifford and Tucker pay to the process of reading the text expands the scope of reflection from content to form, linking the temporal experience of recitation to the concern for time in the text itself.

The experience of recitation is inherently variable and its rigorous study is elusive, but textual analysis and reception studies offer some ways into this world. In a study of Jewish liturgical poetry (*piyyutim*), Laura S. Lieber identifies evidence of performative engagement with the texts, with the effect that past, present, and future are sometimes collapsed in the experience of recitation.⁷¹ A similar effect obtains, I suggest, in Psalm 90 and in the tradition of psalm recitation. Expressions of human finitude in the face of divine power and anger, the petition to God to turn (v. 13), mirroring the same command from God to people (v. 3) and followed by a series of other petitions to God: these elements contribute to performative recitation that would automatically link the context of the past (Moses, perhaps after the Golden Calf episode) to the present.

Canonical context also provides clues to the ancient uses of the Psalms. Psalm 90 inaugurates the fourth of five "books" of psalms, according to the view that Psalms is an anthology

⁶⁸ For Dahood, the contrast between human and divine time constitutes "a meditation on the brevity and misery of human life" in which "[t]he poet contrasts the precariousness of individual and national existence with God's eternal dominion" (*Psalms*, vol. 2, 322). Alter also focuses on the divine-human contrast, in v. 4 for instance: "[T]he poet moves from a thousand years to a passing day to a watch in the night (a mere third of the night). Thus, he concretizes a vision of time seen from God's end of the telescope" (*The Book of Psalms*, 318).

⁶⁹ Richard J. Clifford, "What Does the Psalmist Ask for in Psalms 39:5 and 90:12?" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, (2000): 59-66.

⁷⁰ W. Dennis Tucker, "Exitus, Reditus, and Moral Formation," in *Diachronic and Synchronic: Reading the Psalms in Real Time: Proceedings on the Baylor Symposium on the Book of Psalms* eds., Joes. S. Burnett et al., (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 147, 153-4 [143-56].

⁷¹ Formal engagement includes the use of refrains and responses, while rhetorical engagement describes literary features such as "voice, diction, verbal moods and tenses" (Lieber, "The Rhetoric of Participation: Experiential Elements of Early Hebrew Liturgical Poetry," *Journal of Religion* 90 [2010]: 121, 134, 144 [119-147]).

arranged according to traditions of recitation and practice. If these five books correspond to the history of Israel, it may be that Ps. 90 refers, in lamenting “how long?” for example (v. 13), to the exile. Though the significance and purpose of its arrangement is not fully understood, there can be no doubt that groupings of psalms are not simply random.⁷² Zenger has argued that Pss. 90-92 form a unit that moves from lament (in Ps. 90) to petition and fulfillment (Pss. 91 and 92).⁷³

Psalm 90 captures the complexity of life through the complexity of “times.”⁷⁴ Two doubled terms for the vastness of time are doubled in the first two verses: “generation and generation” (*bēdōr wādōr*) and “from age to age” (*wē’ōlām ‘ad-’ōlām*) (vv. 1-2); this vastness is then contrasted to finite, human time: “For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.” Given this complexity, the question becomes how the Psalms retain any kind of temporal coherence. My response is that the dimension of space, which orders and stabilizes the psalms in writing, and in turn supports traditions of routine recitation in time, provides this coherence.⁷⁵

Recitation traces the lines and spatial structure of Psalm 90 through time, revealing parallel poetic structures, contrasts, and repetitions that disclose a thematic concern for time framed by the two uses of the term “turn” or “return” (vv. 3, 13). The explicit link between time and space in Psalm 90 (v. 2) suggests that the awareness of time is also an awareness of space, just as the recitation of the text in time performs the inscription of the text in space. Space and time, recitation and reflection, go together in tradition because they already go together in this elaborately-structured text.

V. SCHOLARSHIP AND SECULARITY

Familiar binary distinctions of sacred and profane, religious and secular, ancient and modern, experience and analysis, object (Bible) and subject (biblical scholar) underlie a great deal of biblical research, but these distinctions fail to capture the complexity of biblical texts, contexts, and their study. One such complexity is the set of links between biblical texts and their reception. Already grounded in a history of interpretation and reflection, the psalms refuse any bracketing as purely ritualistic, affective, or “sacred” phenomena. Post-biblical interpretation

⁷² The Psalms of Ascents (Pss. 120-134), for instance, have convincingly been characterized as liturgical texts for the festival journey to Jerusalem (Dahood, *Psalms*, vol. 3, 195).

⁷³ Erich Zenger, “Theophanien des Königsgottes JHWH: Transformationen von Psalm 29 in den Teilkompositionen Ps 28-30 und Ps 93-100,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* eds., Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Jr., (Supp. VT XCIX; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 424 [407-442].

⁷⁴ There is broad agreement that the classification of the psalms according to their superscriptions is, as Mitchell Dahood says, “extrinsic and artificial.” (*Psalms*, 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-150) No simple system of classification has emerged in scholarship on the psalms.

⁷⁵ See Mary Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Spatial and geographic thinking also inform the so-called Psalms of Ascents (Pss. 120-134).

follows a history of biblical interpretation that was already rich with numerous hermeneutical practices and perspectives.⁷⁶ In the case of the Psalms, the very idea of a collection of disparate poetic texts, particularly in light of their many editorial superscriptions and arrangement into groupings, implies a long history of reading, editing, and interpretation that has drawn attention but remains little understood. Among the many questions about the Psalms and their reception is what they tell us about biblical ideas of scripture and their post-biblical counterparts. The text's history of inscription, canonization, and recitation grows from this rhetorical expression and literary shape, with the result that the text becomes imbricated with its original context and reception history.

With the sacred-profane dichotomy and its attendant narrative of progress, modern scholarship also tends to support an aesthetic bias toward innovation and novelty, reading texts as if they are original compositions being read for the first time. The bias toward innovation belongs to modern, secular aesthetics, but it also reflects a kind of "religious" impulse, the kind of "natural supernaturalism" M.H. Abrams found in Romantic literature.⁷⁷ One can question the modern emphasis on the uniqueness and originality of biblical texts, which overlooks the ancient preference to seem *unoriginal* and traditional. What this omits is the experience of recitation, of rereading a text, which is far more characteristic of the reading that takes place in biblical tradition. By considering recitation, biblical scholarship can move beyond the aesthetics of novelty and originality to consider the aesthetic possibilities of traditional texts and established patterns.

The scholarly study of psalms belongs to the long reception history of the Bible, though scholars are typically silent on their place in this history. The tradition of reading and valorizing biblical texts includes biblical scholars regardless of their personal views, distinctive methods, and diverse audiences. Several thinkers, including Walter Benjamin, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and Michel de Certeau, have demonstrated how biblical tradition permeates much of what goes by the name of secular culture. In this vein, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that Christianity is "engaged from its beginning in a perpetual process . . . of self-rectification and self-surpassing."⁷⁸ For Nancy, Christianity at its core involves "self-surpassing" and otherness: "Christianity designates nothing other, essentially (that is to say simply, infinitely simply: through an inaccessible simplicity), than the demand to open in this world an alterity or an unconditional alienation."⁷⁹ Biblical scholarship, which at its core strives to gain independence

⁷⁶ See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁷⁷ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973).

⁷⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 39. Christianity, moreover, is deconstructive; it is "the movement of its own distension" (149).

⁷⁹ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 10.

and critical distance from the Bible and religious institutions, thus falls under the penumbra of “Christianity” and biblical traditions of reading, recitation, and commentary.⁸⁰

Modern studies of the Psalms include form criticism, with its focus on ritual settings, source criticism and its emphasis on parallels to non-Israelite texts, and literary criticism, which valorizes aesthetic qualities of the text. Each of these methods tends to ascribe an undifferentiated sacred time to the Psalms. Form criticism attempts to reconstruct the text’s original religious context, its *Sitz im Leben*, by imagining what kind of ritual may be implied by clues in the text. Source criticism regards the Psalms as archeologically-layered documents of the history of Mesopotamian and Canaanite religion as well. This led to the fruitful study of psalms as reservoirs of pre-biblical myth and traditions. The third mode of scholarship, literary study, attends to the aesthetic, rhetorical, and poetic features of the text in its canonical form. Like the other two modes of scholarship, secular literary studies analyze the text as an artifact rather than as a part of life that might include practices such as recitation.

When they invoke the category of time, these scholarly approaches assume that the Psalms represent something like Mircea Eliade’s notion of “sacred time,” an encounter with a cosmogonic past that disrupts the ordinary flow of “profane” time.⁸¹ Rooted in the sociology and anthropology of the early twentieth century, particularly the work of Rudolf Otto and Emile Durkheim, Eliade’s dichotomy of sacred and profane casts the experience of time into sharply-contrasting categories.⁸² By its emphasis on the individual’s experience of objects, time, and space, Eliade’s conception of the sacred resembles modern secular aesthetics.⁸³ But Eliade’s binary division of reality into sacred and profane phenomena fails to account for the complexity of experience and traditions. The task of recognizing the complexity of biblical texts and

⁸⁰ Recent criticisms of biblical studies echo this point by noting that in spite of claims to intellectual independence and rigor, a primary motivation for biblical scholarship has always been the centrality of the Bible to ongoing religious traditions, especially Christianity. See, e.g., Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007).

⁸¹ Some biblical scholars, including André Neher and Jon Levenson, directly cite Eliade in their work: Neher, *The Prophetic Existence*, trans. William Wolf (South Brunswick, NJ: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1969; Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 1987).

⁸² Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 68-69, 202-03. Another influential account of religion as individual experience is Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (New York: Penguin, 1977). Maslow’s notion of the peak-experience endows the individual with “his own private religion, which he develops out of his own private revelations in which are revealed to him his own private myths and symbols, rituals and ceremonials...” (28).

⁸³ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 211. Eliade is not unique in this aesthetic orientation; Otto’s experience of the holy as *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*, analogous to the categories of the sublime and the beautiful, is also thoroughly and explicitly aesthetic. William James characterizes the specific experiences of prayer and worship as aesthetic (*The Varieties of Religious Experience* [New York: Modern Library, 1929], 448-449).

traditions involves articulating conceptions of “religion” or “aesthetics” that exceed the boundaries of the secular-religious binary.

The distinction between sacred and profane time echoes the long-standing distinction between religion and secularity that began in Late Antiquity. The modern distinction, however, has its own historical specificity, tied to the Industrial Revolution, new technologies of time measurement, and romantic nostalgia for the past.⁸⁴ In his 1783 *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, for example, Johann Gottfried von Herder celebrates the “sublime glory” of Hebrew biblical poetry, which he says emerges from its “form and feeling.”⁸⁵ By emphasizing the feeling produced by biblical poetry, Herder replaces history with aesthetics, making the text directly available to a modern reader. It is this notion of religion as feeling or experience, rooted in the romanticism of Schleiermacher and others, that informs the work of Rudolf Otto (*The Idea of the Holy*, 1917) and Eliade (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 1957).

The form criticism of Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel inherits Herder’s emphasis on form and feeling. Hermann Gunkel’s 1933 *Introduction to the Psalms* locates the texts’ origins in the cult and “holy speeches” of ancient Israel.⁸⁶ He extrapolates from the Psalms’ later use back to their cultic beginnings.⁸⁷ Sigmund Mowinckel builds on Gunkel’s form criticism and the emerging discipline of *Religionswissenschaft* to combine cult (or ritual) with myth and ethos. The prescribed words and actions of cultic ritual, including sacrifice, worship, and rites of passage, characterize this cult, and the Psalms, argues Mowinckel, represent its written legacy.⁸⁸ The basis for the cult is an experience of sacred time: “[T]he experienced present has ‘eternal’ importance; and ‘eternal’ here is not our rationalistic endless temporal line, but rather a quality of value, an eternal present, beyond which our sight does not pass. . . . The festival is the

⁸⁴ For example, Robert Louis Stevenson extols country walks as an escape from the time-bound life of cities:

I know a village where there are hardly any clocks, where no one knows more of the days of the week than by a sort of instinct for the fête on Sundays...and if people were aware how slow Time journeyed in that village, and what armfuls of spare hours he gives, over and above the bargain, to its wise inhabitants, I believe there would be a stampede out of London, Liverpool, Paris, and a variety of large towns, where the clock s lost their heads, and shake the hours out each one faster than the other, as though they were all in a wager. . . . It is much to be noticed, there were no clocks and watches in the much-vaunted days before the flood. . . . And so I would say of a modern man of business, you may do what you will for him, put him in Eden, give him the elixir of life—he has still a flaw at heart, he still has his business habits. “Walking Tours,” in *“Virginibus Puerisque” and Other Papers* (London: Standard Book Company, 1930). 140-141.

⁸⁵ Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, trans. James Marsh (Burlington, 1833), 23.

⁸⁶ Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 7-8.

⁸⁷ Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 7.

⁸⁸ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 17.

experience of an all-embracing 'Now' that includes the future—the 'eternal Now.'"⁸⁹ Form criticism thus projects a "sacred" past onto the biblical text. Source criticism tends to describe a transition from sacred myth to the more rationalized religion of Israel. Citing the vast corpus of Canaanite literature discovered at Ras Shamra, source critic Mitchell Dahood's commentary on the Psalms suggests that the psalms advance over the mythological, sacred time of their Canaanite forebears to a more rationalized, historical time: "[T]he adaptation of mythological motifs by prophets and psalmists does not diminish the significance or the originality of prophecy and psalmody...[gods were] merely mythological references to set off, as the case may be, the omnipotence and majesty of Yahweh."⁹⁰

Literary criticism, by apparent contrast, attends to the compositional beauty and aesthetic experience of the psalms.⁹¹ Psalm 90, he suggests, fits the description of pure literature because "it can be freed from its religious moorings and take its place along side of Homer's epics as one of the two supreme literary, as opposed to religious, masterpieces of the ancient occidental world."⁹² More recently, Robert Alter's *The Book of Psalms* (2007) argues forcefully against other modes of scholarship in favor of a depiction of the literary artistry and originality in the psalms.⁹³ Arguing against the form-critical emphasis on the psalms as evidence for ancient rituals, Alter prefers a more flexible understanding of the texts as poetry: "[T]he psalm was a multifaceted poetic form serving many different purposes, some cultic and others not."⁹⁴ Alter

⁸⁹ Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 187. Westermann criticizes Mowinckel's emphasis on the "cult": "[I]n the Old Testament there is no absolute, timeless entity called 'cult,' but that worship in Israel, in its indissoluble connection with the history of God's dealings with his people, developed gradually in all its various relationships, those of place, of time, of personnel, and of instrumentality," (Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 21). In the tradition of Romantic hermeneutics, Mowinckel also strives to understand the intentions and feelings of the poet: "We read them [Pss. 90 and 139] as contemplations of the eternity or the omnipresence of God—but that is not what the poems seeks to convey. . . . We must first listen to the emotion in the psalmist's own heart, and to be able to do that we must try to find the actual situation in which he is placed" (Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 23-24).

⁹⁰ Dahood, *Psalms*, xxxv.

⁹¹ An early version of this approach is David A. Robertson's comparison of Psalm 90 and Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." Holding both texts up as models of literary and aesthetic excellence, Robertson distinguishes between literature and religion as follows: "pure literature relies primarily on the manipulation of words for its effects on our thought-emotions, and only secondarily on the particular ideas expressed by these words, whereas the opposite is the case with religious literature." David A. Robertson, "Literary Criticism of the Bible: Psalm 90 and Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,'" *Semeia* no 8 1977, p 35-50. (50).

⁹² Robertson, "Literary Criticism," 50.

⁹³ Alter defends the originality of Psalms in spite of their debt to other ancient forms:

"The reliance of these poems, however, on a repertoire of traditional images and stereotypical phrases does not preclude the creation of fresh and moving poetry," *The Book of Psalms*, xxiv-xxv. See Brian Britt, "Robert Alter and the Bible as Literature," *Literature and Theology* 24 (2010): 56-72.

⁹⁴ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, xviii. He writes further: "[T]his is by and large a highly dynamic poetic system in which ideas and images are progressively pushed to extremes and themes brought to a crisis

agrees with other scholars that the psalms transcend ordinary time, but it is the edifying pleasure of literature, not the sacred time of ancient ritual, that affords this experience. In making this point, Alter echoes not only his own studies of biblical and modern literature but also a tradition of literary criticism, rooted in the Renaissance, that considers imaginative literature to be a source of “religious” experience. Where other biblical scholars see religion as the means to escape mundane time, for Alter it is literature, a category tied to secularism, that affords this outlet.

Despite their differences, all three schools of research make anachronistic use of the religious-secular dichotomy in analyzing the Psalms. They all regard the Psalms as the source of sacred feelings or experiences in the tradition of Romantic thought: for form critics this experience comes from ritual; for source critics it comes from myth; and for literary critics it comes from the creative expression of the poets.⁹⁵ All three regard the Psalms and Israelite religion to represent stages in a religious development more advanced than ancient Mesopotamian and Canaanite religions. They assume that the Psalms date from an earlier phase of a process that leads from sacred to secular time, and that the rituals that accompany psalm recitation involve the experience of sacred time. Is that true? Do the Psalms affirm Faulkner’s dictum that “the past is never dead. It’s not even past”?⁹⁶ One alternative to Eliadean sacred time is Sacha Stern’s *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism*, which argues that there is *no* conception of time in ancient Israel; only processes and events, but not a conception of *time as such*.⁹⁷ Stern is surely right that conceptions of time in ancient Israel do not correspond to modern ones. But this is not to say that the Hebrew Bible has no interest in matters of time, for as William Gallois argues in *Time, Religion, and History*, numerous ideas and debates on time run through biblical texts, including the Psalms.⁹⁸

Biblical scholarship ought to recognize and address the temporal dimensions of reading and reciting the Psalm texts; this means expanding the goals of scholarship to include reception.

and a turning point. It is a formal aspect of the poetry of Psalms that helps make it an abiding resource for readers, whether they are in the grip of stark despair or on the crest of elation” (Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, xxiv).

⁹⁵ The tendency can also be found in modern religious thinkers. Joseph Turner argues that Rosenzweig’s reading of the text, particularly its final verses, affirms the human need for revelation and expresses “a unique type of religious experience, possibly a conversion experience, that results in a new understanding of human freedom, such as that which he placed against the expression of freedom in Goethe’s poem on Hope. Read in this light, Psalm 90 reflects a unique vantage point, a particular existential orientation, within the ‘one’ eternal ‘cosmic day of the Lord.’” Joseph Turner, “A Reading of Psalm 90 in Light of Franz Rosenzweig’s Notion of Time,” in Martin Brassler, ed., *Rosenzweig als Leser*, *Conditio Judaica* 44 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2004), 505 [499-507].

⁹⁶ Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 80.

⁹⁷ Sacha Stern, *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁹⁸ William Gallois, *Time, Religion and History* (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2007), 92-101; a brief discussion of Psalm 90 appears on p. 71. In Job and Psalm 90, for instance, Gallois finds philosophical discussions of divine and human time that bespeak greater fluidity and skepticism than orthodox models of religion would admit (*Time, Religion and History*, 70-71, 77-82).

Where form criticism may situate a psalm in a hypothetical ancient rite of coronation or a pilgrimage festival, a focus on recitation may attend to what Gallois calls the “performative and literary functions” of the texts, whereby a text like “Sing to him, sing praises to him, tell of all his wonderful works” (1 Chr 16:8) reflexively points to a textual culture of recitation.⁹⁹ For biblical scholars to combine reception history with the study of the text requires the admission that biblical scholarship itself belongs to a long history and tradition of biblical study.

VI. CONCLUSION

Psalm 90 accommodates multiple understandings and experiences of time, but its compositional coherence balances this diversity with unity. Practices of recitation, reading, and reflection on the Psalms accommodate this unity in diversity, naming but not resolving perennial questions about time. In the end what we have are complex selves, complex traditions, and complex texts interacting with each other. If there is any coherence in this complexity, it has to do with fictions and metaphors of coherence: spatial unity of the text, continuity of tradition, unity of the self. Like all reading, the recitation of psalms is ultimately an aesthetic, subjective experience, though traditional instruction and ritual give this aesthetic a social dimension. As embodied recitation, the psalm affords an aesthetic not of private escape or disinterestedness but of embeddedness in history and social practice. The structure of Psalm 90, particularly with the framing repetition of terms “return” in vv. 3 and 13, along with the four imperatives in vv. 12-14 and the three jussives in vv. 14-17, lends the text unity without certain closure.

Augustine’s *Confessions* contains abstract discussions of time, but this abstraction arises within a tradition of biblical reading and recitation. Secular philosophy, religious studies, and biblical scholarship commonly overlook biblical reading and recitation in Augustine’s thought and in biblical traditions more broadly. This oversight reflects a modern tendency to separate religion, typically construed as “faith” or belief, from the secular domains of reasoning on the one hand and aesthetics on the other. The modern reception of Psalm 90 splits in these two directions, one reading the text mostly as a meditation on human and divine time, and the other as an object for musical expression and enjoyment. The Psalms and their history, particularly traditions of recitation, resist both extremes of abstract thought and embodied desire. Beyond the false dichotomy of sacred and secular time, practices of recitation were always already post-secular.

Appendix: Psalm 90 (NRSV)

1. [A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.] Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.
2. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
3. You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals."

⁹⁹ Gallois, *Time, Religion, and History*, 94.

4. For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.
5. You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;
6. in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.
7. For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
8. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
9. For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.
10. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.
11. Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
12. So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.
13. Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants!
14. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
15. Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.
16. Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.
17. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands-- O prosper the work of our hands!

BRIAN BRITT is Professor in the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech. He works at the intersection of biblical studies and cultural theory on questions of modernity and tradition. His most recent book is *Biblical Curses and the Displacement of Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011). His other books are *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* (Continuum, 1996); *Rewriting Moses: The Narrative Eclipse of the Text* (T&T Clark/Continuum 2004); and the co-edited volume (with Alexandra Cuffel) *Religion, Gender, and Culture in the Pre-Modern World* (Palgrave, 2007). He received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School.

©Brian Britt.

Britt, Brian. "Psalm Recitation and Post-Secular Time: Augustine, the iPod, and Psalm 90," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 12 no. 2 (Fall 2012): 122-147.