THE COSTLY LOSS OF PRAISE
ROLF JACOBSON

In his 1986 article, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” Walter Brueggemann argues that when the lament psalms are no longer used for their “specific social function,” losses are incurred in faith and in life. 1 Brueggemann emphasizes two losses for the life of faith. First, he points to a loss in covenantal interaction between the believer and God that occurs “when there is no lament through which the believer can take initiative” with God. Brueggemann draws heuristically upon object-relations theory to argue that lament is a form of prayer through which the believer can hold God accountable for God’s covenantal responsibilities. 2 Lament is necessary to covenantal faith because without it, faith loses the ability to take initiative with God. “The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility.” Second, Brueggemann points to a diminished capacity to “raise legitimate questions of justice in terms of social goods, social access, and social power.” 3 Brueggemann argues that fundamental to all lament prayers is the believer’s assertion that “life is not right.” 4 By confronting God with the charge that all is not right, “Israel kept the justice question visible and legitimate.” 5 When lament is lost, however, the ability to raise justice questions is diminished.

My thesis is quite simple: We also have suffered a loss of praise, a loss that has corresponding cultural costs. From the start, some might object that praise has not been lost, pointing out that songs of praise abound in worship sanctuaries. I do not dispute that the vocabulary and language of praise is heard and sung regularly in the worship of many communities of

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2 Ibid., 104.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 105.
5 Ibid., 106.
faith. Rather, my contention is that in our society as a whole, worship is the only place in which praise is heard; praise no longer is heard in daily life. It is as if praise has been quarantined both temporally and spatially to those one or two hours when communities of faith meet for official worship. By confining praise to worship, our society has lost certain vital aspects of the function of praise. Here I want to recall a caveat of Brueggemann’s analysis of the loss of lament. It is the loss of the “specific social function” of lament to which Brueggemann calls our attention.6 Although the vocabulary of praise survives in fossilized form in official worship, to a large extent the “specific social function” of praise has been lost.

**Basic Aspects of the Function of Praise**

In order to evaluate the specific social function of praise, it is first necessary to review some basic aspects of the function of praise in the Bible.

*Praise is Response*

There are two main ways in which praise is response. The first of these ways can be seen in the formal structure of the hymns. As is well-known, the structure of the hymns is two-fold: an imperative *call to praise* followed by indicative *reasons for praise*. In the structure of the hymn, praise is response in the sense of being a congregational response to a call to worship. See, for example, Ps 136:1-3:

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\begin{align*}
O & \text{ give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,} \\
& \text{for his steadfast love endures forever.} \\
O & \text{ give thanks to the God of gods,} \\
& \text{for his steadfast love endures forever.} \\
O & \text{ give thanks to the Lord of lords,} \\
& \text{for his steadfast love endures forever.}
\end{align*}
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The first phrase in each verse contains the imperative call to praise; the second phrase contains the reason why such praise should be spoken. It should be noted that the implied setting for the hymns is a cultic setting.

A second way that praise is response can be seen in the songs of thanksgiving. Claus Westermann in particular emphasizes that the song of thanksgiving, which he calls the psalm of declarative praise, is related to the individual lament psalm.7 The lament is prayed from a situation of crisis; the song of thanksgiving is sung in response to God’s deliverance of the psalmist from that crisis. In the lament, a recurring element is the vow to praise (the promise that if God will answer the prayer, the psalmist will praise God for that deliverance); in the song of thanksgiving, a recurring element is a recollection of the crisis through which the psalmist has

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6Ibid., 98.

passed. For example, in Psalm 116, the psalmist recalls a crisis from which God granted deliverance:

I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he has inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the Lord: “O Lord, I pray, save my life!” (vv. 1–4)

Here, praise is response in the sense that it is the thankful response of one whom God has delivered from a situation of crisis. It should be noted that unlike the hymn, the implied life-setting for the song of thanksgiving is not cultic: “Here we recognize the point at which the praise of God in its simplest form is to be found in the midst of the history of God’s people as reported in the historical books. . . . For this form of the praise of God we can say in any case that its origin is not the cult.” Thus, praise is responsive in two ways—as congregational response to a call to praise and as individual response to help received from God.

Praise Evokes a World

While the responsive nature of praise is an acceptable starting point for understanding praise, praise cannot be adequately understood without grasping that praise is also generative in that praise creates a worldview, praise evokes a world that does not exist in the same way when praise is not spoken. Praise assumes a world where God is an active agent, and then praise evokes this world by naming God as the agent responsible for specific actions and blessings. There is no such thing as uninterpreted reality. By ascribing agency to God for specific transformations, praise interprets reality in such a way that God is evoked as an active agent in daily life.

An example from one of the psalms may help clarify this world-evoking function of praise. Psalm 30 is a song of thanksgiving sung by one who has recovered from illness. The psalmist has experienced a reality: She has recovered from illness. But this reality must be interpreted. The simple fact of the recovery from illness could be ascribed to other agents and powers (doctors, medicine, and so on), or could simply be accepted as accidental. The psalmist, however, names God as the agent responsible for her recovery: “O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me” (v. 2). Her praise attributes her recovery to God: “You have healed me.” Her praise renders a world in which God is active. Such praise goes beyond mere response. It also creates a theological worldview in which

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8A clear exposition of this form can be found in Patrick Miller, *They Cried to the Lord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 184–98.

God is an actor. Such praise interprets the naked facts of life and constructs a theological reality in which specific blessings are understood as the work of God.

Praise is Polemical and Political

Third, praise is always polemical and often political. Because praise evokes a world in which the Lord alone reigns, biblical praise is always both praise of the true Lord and praise against all false lords—human and non-human—who seek to set themselves up in God's place. Another way of putting this is to say that praise not only evokes a world, it also undoes, it deconstructs all other worlds. In order to evoke the true world in which God alone reigns in righteousness, all false lords and false worlds must be undone. This may be why Israel’s praise so often goes out of its way to undercut all powers that might rival the Lord. The false lords attacked in praise include military might (“Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God” [Ps 20:7]), the self (“As for me, I said in my prosperity, ‘I shall not be moved.’ . . . You have turned my mourning into dancing” [Ps 30:6, 11a]), idols (“Their idols are silver and gold . . . they have mouths but do not speak, eyes but do not see” [Ps 115:4–5], and powerful human beings (“[The Lord] has brought the powerful down from their thrones . . . and sent the rich away empty” [Luke 1:52–3]). The point is that praise is both polemical—it is praise against false lords—and it is political—it undoes the orders of this world that are set up against the Lord.10

Praise Occurs in Daily Life

The fact that praise occurs not only in the cult but also in daily life is an aspect of praise that is underappreciated in biblical scholarship. Since Mowinckel, the cultic interpretation of praise has so dominated scholarly imagination that we have lost sight of the fact that outside of the Psalter, praise occurs regularly in the context of daily life. Scriptural examples of praise in daily life are legion, but it is worth rehearsing a few of these in order to emphasize this point:

In Exodus 15, Miriam sings praise for God's rescue of the people from slavery.
In Judges 5, Deborah sings following the deliverance from oppressive adversaries.
In 1 Samuel 2, Hannah sings in thanksgiving for the life of Samuel.
In 2 Samuel 22, David praises God for deliverance from enemies.
In Isaiah 38, Hezekiah sings praise following his recovery from illness.
In Jonah 2, while still in the belly of the fish, Jonah thanks God for delivering him.

10I do not mean to suggest that some worldly orders are pristine and are not undone by praise. All earthly orders are subject to sin and are the target of this polemical and political aspect of praise. Nor is the church insulated from this impact of praise. The church is not a godly kingdom on earth, but is a fully political and fully human institution, in which sin manifests itself. Praise targets the church just as much as it does secular organizations.
And, of course, in Luke 1–2, Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, the heavenly messengers, Simeon, and Anna all praise God in the midst of daily life.

These examples are well-known, but they are only the beginning of praise spoken in daily life. In 2 Sam 5:20, David sings again in the midst of his battles; in 2 Chr 20:26–28, the people sing; in Gen 24:27, Eliezer sings praise when he meets Rebekah; in Exod 18:8–12, Jethro responds to Moses’ good news with praise; in 1 Kgs 18:39, the people confess and praise. “And what more should I say?” to borrow the words of one New Testament scribe, “For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah” and the rest. The point is that any analysis of the “specific social function” of praise cannot be limited to cultic contexts; it must appreciate that praise also occurs in daily life.

In this biblical pattern, the vocabulary of praise is learned in the cult, but individuals apply it to themselves in their daily lives. For example, the vocabulary of Jonah’s song betrays its cultic origin: “My prayer came to you, into your holy temple” (Jon 2:7). But the belly of the fish is clearly not a cultic setting. The implication is that the vocabulary of praise is learned in the cult, and then believers apply it in their daily lives. Similar hints of original cultic settings can be found in the other examples of those who praise God in daily life. This biblical pattern of cultic language being reappropriated by individuals in their daily lives suggests that the liturgy truly becomes “the work of the people” only when the rote formulas we learn in the liturgy become part of the way we speak in daily life.

THE LOSS OF PRAISE IN DAILY LIFE: THE SUBSTITUTION OF CONGRATULATIONS FOR PRAISE

It was allowed above that the vocabulary of praise remains alive—if not precisely well—in the official worship of various communities of faith. But with the exception of the postgame interviews following basketball or football games, the language of praise has ceased to be heard in mainstream American life.

In daily life, the language of praise has, for the most part, been replaced by the language of congratulations. When we see a blessing unfold, rather than saying, “Praise the Lord,” we are more likely to say, “Congratulations.” In January 1999, my wife gave birth to our first child. Many friends called, wrote, or stopped by to offer us “congratulations.” I suppose the number of well-wishers ran into the hundreds. Of all those people, only two called or wrote to “praise God” for our daughter’s birth. I do not doubt that many more people than those two thought of our daughter’s birth in terms of a blessing from God, but no one else actually praised God for Ingrid’s birth. And, of course, the point is that a different

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11Some might attempt the argument that the etymological roots of congratulations point to the meaning of giving “thanks with.” Etymology, however, is often misleading and this is surely such a case. Words mean what they mean in the contexts in which they occur. The dominant use of “congratulations” is used to praise or commend a human subject, not to give thanks with a human subject to God.
world is evoked when we congratulate a human instead of praising the Lord.

The reasons that congratulations have replaced praise are largely epistemological. The dominant epistemological myth of our time is that of the autonomous individual: the myth that we are rugged individuals who are responsible for ourselves and our successes. In the thought-world of this myth, the autonomous self has replaced God—and all other lords—at the center of the universe. Therefore, when things go well for supposedly autonomous individuals—when a person gets a new job, or gives birth to a baby, or recovers from an illness, or succeeds in some endeavor—we do not praise God for that success; rather, we commend or congratulate the individual.¹²

"Without praise, there is no answer to the question, 'Who will free us from this body of death?'"

A second epistemological reason for the triumph of congratulations is that we are embarrassed by praise. The praise psalms, in Brueggemann's lovely phrase, are "songs of Impossibility."¹³ That is, the praise psalms name God as the agent of impossible transformations: The blind see, the lame walk, the barren give birth, and the poor are raised up to sit with princes. On a practical level, we do not believe that such transformations are possible. I cannot speak for others, but while I am comfortable with vague praise that credits God with abstract blessings such as forgiveness, creation, employment, healing, and so on, I grow exceedingly uncomfortable when I hear people attributing specific blessings or actions directly to God. It makes me quite uneasy when I hear someone praise God for recovery from a specific disease or for a particular new job, because I cannot help thinking of another person who did not recover from a disease or another person who lost a job. The specificity in the praise psalms is epistemologically embarrassing. The language of praise poses a challenge to us because, to a modern mind, it is embarrassing to attribute any specific transformations or blessings to God. Praise that names God as the author of specific actions or blessings trespasses into territory that the autonomous self wants to preserve for itself. That is, it credits God with actions for which the self wants to take credit.

The replacement of praise with congratulations is not a neutral switch. Something is lost when that switch is made. What is at stake, of course, is lordship—who we understand to be the sovereign agent operative in the


human sphere, who we understand to be lord of life. Congratulations understand each human being as his or her own lord; congratulations evoke a world where the self is sovereign and is responsible for both the good and the bad that occurs in life. When we congratulate a person for a promotion at work, the birth of a child, and so on, our congratulations evoke a world in which each individual is responsible for his or her successes. Praise, on the other hand, understands God as lord; praise shifts credit for both successes and failures away from the self, and we evoke a world in which some agent other than the self is lord.

**ASPECTS OF THE LOSS OF PRAISE**

In the remaining space, I outline four aspects of the loss of praise. The exposition of these losses does not pretend to be comprehensive, only suggestive of the social costs that accrue when praise is lost in daily life.

*The Self is Left as Lord*

First, when praise disappears from daily life, the self is left as its own uncontested lord. This is a problem because the self is not up to the challenge of being its own lord. In the face of such ordinary external threats as cancer, infertility, corporate downsizing, and so on, the rugged individual in all of us is exposed as powerless. And in the face of such monumental external threats as racism, the global economy, ecological disaster, systemic evil, and so on, even a nation of autonomous selves is powerless. Moreover, there is a dark side of the ideology of the autonomous self. When all credit is given to the self for good things, a corresponding blame is implied for the bad things that occur in life. That is, this ideology implies that if we are truly our own lords, then we are responsible for both the good and the bad that we experience. In this way, the ideology of the autonomous self blames the victim for suffering: The poor man is responsible for his poverty, the abused woman for her abuse, and the sick man for his illness.¹⁴

Yet, in spite of the fact that the self is not up to the challenge of being its own lord, it cannot and will not of its own choice give up its claim to lordship. The self desperately wants to be its own lord, and clings to lordship with all its scrawny might. We like to receive the credit when things go well: I like to be congratulated for the birth of my daughter, sound health or recovery from disease, my professional success, and so on. When there is a promotion at work or new employment comes along, the self is all too happy to take full credit for the new job. When a person recovers from illness or gives birth to a new life, the self enjoys basking in

¹⁴Or if not the sick, then the parent of the sick must be responsible for the sickness. When I was ill with cancer as a teenager, some well-intentioned soul asked my mother if she felt guilty that she had not fed me the proper diet of fruits and vegetables, the lack of which resulted in my cancer. As my mother correctly responded, “You can’t pin that one on me.” But the myth of the autonomous self *must* hold someone responsible for everything, including things for which no one *can* be responsible.
the warmth of the congratulations. Because of this, the self will not give up its claim on lordship.

So there the self stays, locked up in a strange captivity: unequal to the requirements of self reign, yet unwilling and unable to surrender the reins. Locked in this internal struggle, I am in bondage to my body, myself. What is needed in such a case is the intrusion of some other agent or some other lord, who will free us from this slavery. Praise names precisely such a lord. Without praise, there is no answer to the question, “Who will free us from this body of death?” It is no accident that when Paul asks this very question, he answers it with praise: “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:25).

A World Reduced to Suffocating Possibility

Second, when we cease to praise, we evoke a world that is reduced to suffocating human possibility, one impoverished of the abundant impossibilities of God.

Above, I argued that the formal categories of the psalms reveal that praise is response in two different senses. In the hymn, praise is congregational response to a human call to praise. In the song of thanksgiving—which is closely related to the lament prayer for help—praise is individual response to a specific transforming act of God. When we praise God in the cult but quit praising God for specific transformations in daily life, we opt only for praise that is the response of one human to another and eschew praise that is a response to God’s direct actions. When we quit praising God for specific transformations, we drive a wedge between the prayer for help and the song of praise, disconnecting our praise from the transformations and blessings that are supposed to fuel it. When we quit praising God in everyday life, we evoke a world in which God no longer performs “impossible” transformations on our behalf, a world reduced to barren human possibility. In such a world, even though praise continues to be heard in formal worship, praise can no longer fulfill its specific social function, because the communal praise that occurs in worship tends to omit references to any specific transformations wrought by God. In the cult, we offer only abstract, unspecific praise to God: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” This is at it should be. Because public worship is regular and communal, it is difficult for public worship to address those specific transformations that occur at irregular moments in individual lives. For this reason, praise that is sung in worship must—to borrow Westermann’s categories—use “descriptive praise” (praise that describes God abstractly) rather than “declarative praise” (praise that responds to God’s specific transformations). But descriptive praise by nature cannot connect our praise with any specific action of God on our behalf. Therefore, in the long run, the descriptive praise of the hymns becomes praise that is only response to a human call to praise. That is, it becomes a completely human activity that renders only a world denuded of God’s impossible transformations.
The Costly Loss of Praise

Third, when praise is no longer heard in daily life, the polemical and political effects of praise are diminished. Israel's praise not only evokes a world in which the Lord reigns, it also undoes worlds in which other false lords—such as Pharaoh, Herod, or the autonomous self—reign. When praise is silenced—or quarantined within public worship—the destabilizing political possibilities of praise are lost.

One lamentable trend in recent scholarship is that many biblical scholars identify praise as functioning only to legitimate the status quo. Praise is seen as simply being a mechanism by which the ruling class dominates society and keeps the poor in their place. One scholar who represents this view states that the praise psalms make people feel good, and in doing so they "inculcate a harmonious worldview that contradicts any need for reform or critique of the society. Social maintenance takes place through the use of these psalms."  

"Because praise evokes a world in which the illegitimate reigns of false lords are undone . . . praise inevitably destabilizes unjust social and political arrangements."

It is true that praise can and, at times, does function to maintain status quo and to prop up unjust social arrangements. But it is surely wrong to claim that praise only functions in this manner. The identification of praise with the dominant class both fails to appreciate the internal social critique that the praise psalms preserve, and also fails to appreciate the narrative and historical contexts in which praise occurs. As was argued above, because praise is about the business of evoking a theological worldview, biblical praise passages often preserve a social critique that deconstructs and undoes political powers that are opposed to God's righteous reign. Because praise specifically evokes a world in which the illegitimate reigns of false lords are undone and in which the righteous reign of the Lord is evoked, praise inevitably—inevitably—destabilizes unjust social and political arrangements. That is why the cultural costs of the loss of praise may be paid most dearly by those on the margins of social power: ethnic and cultural minorities, children, and women.

Moreover, precisely because praise preserves this social critique, both in the biblical narrative and throughout history, praise of God can be heard on

15Jon L. Berquist, Judaism in Peria's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 195. Berquist understands "the priesthood" to be the dominant group in Persian-period Yehud. He understands the praise psalms as functioning to create social solidarity in order to legitimize the priesthood's control of society and to "legitimate violence committed in service of the social order" (p. 197). "In general, the psalms of praise legitimate the social order and at times will allow a rhetoric of violence against those who oppress the society's status quo" (p. 198).
the lips of those involved in counter-cultural struggles. It is worth emphasizing that, in the Bible, it is precisely women whose praise is so polemically oriented against the present orders: Miriam in Exodus 15, Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, Deborah in Judges 5, and Mary in Luke 1. This has been equally true of the praise that women have sung throughout history. In our own country, the rhetoric of praise sung by women played an important role in the abolition, women’s suffrage, and civil rights movements. Perhaps no person better represents the polemical and political potential of praise than Fannie Lou Hamer, the black woman whose strong voice was a trumpet that brought the walls of American segregation tumbling down.

In *God’s Long Summer*, Charles Marsh’s chronicle of the role of faith in the civil rights movement, the first chapter is devoted to the story of Fannie Lou Hamer. Like so many women who praised God in the Bible, Mrs. Hamer was barren, but her barrenness came not from God but men. When she had gone in for a routine removal of a small uterine cyst, without her knowledge or consent, a white doctor gave her a hysterectomy. Against such violence, Fannie Lou Hamer’s main weapon was praise. Her singing earned her a national reputation and a leadership role in the civil rights movement, but it also earned her hatred, death threats, and finally, it earned her torture. In a gripping passage, Marsh describes how Hamer and her colleagues were arrested in Winona, Mississippi, and then how Fannie Lou was tortured:

Mrs. Hamer’s suffering and humiliation left her with the certainty that death was imminent. There was no singing at this nightfall.

But then the next day something happened that slowly transformed the killing despair of the jail and dispersed the power of death. “When you’re in a brick cell, locked up, and haven’t done anything to anybody but still you’re locked up there, well sometimes words just begin to come to you and you begin to sing,” she said. Song broke free. Mrs. Hamer sang:

Paul and Silas was bound in jail, let my people go.
Had no money for to go their bail, let my people go.

Paul and Silas began to shout, let my people go.
Jail doors open and they walked out, let my people go.17

Fannie Lou Hamer’s songs raised up the lowly and brought down the powerful. She remained barren all her life, but her singing conceived for an entire nation what Abraham Lincoln called “a new birth of freedom.”

*The Loss of Praise Directed Against God*

A final facet of praise that is often overlooked is the way praise can function as an accusation against God. As has been maintained repeatedly, praise evokes a world, a world that is just and in which the Lord reigns in righteousness. As we all know, however, this world that is evoked by praise

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17Ibid., 21-2.
is impossible, or at least, it does not exist in this world. Things are not right in God's creation, and not all of it can be blamed on human sin: There are diseases, there are natural disasters, and there is death—there is suffering for which God alone is responsible. Praise that evokes a better world can function also as an assault, a complaint against the Creator and Sustainer of this world. In the Psalter, praise does function that way at times. In Psalm 82, the praise of God as the righteous judge of the divine council builds up to a closing demand: "Rise up, O God, judge the earth!" (v. 8a). The implication is that all is not right in the world, and the praise is aimed squarely at God who is called to make things right. Similarly, in Psalm 89, praise for "God's steadfast love" (vv. 1–2) as shown in the victory over chaos and in the permanent covenant with David builds up to an outcry against God: "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? . . . Lord, where is your steadfast love of old?" (vv. 46a, 49a). This praise functions as an accusation that fuels the petitioner's cry for help.

When we lose the vocabulary of praise from our daily lives, we lose part of the vocabulary by which we can hold God accountable to God's promises. In his book *Legends of Our Time*, Elie Wiesel recounts how one soul first abandoned the vocabulary of praise because he had lost faith in the impossible transformations of God, but then retrieved praise because it can function to accuse God. Wiesel tells of Pinhas, a fellow prisoner in Auschwitz who had formerly been director of a rabbinical school. After being together for the better part of a year, Wiesel noticed that his friend seemed close to admitting defeat and asked him what he was thinking. Pinhas responded, "Tomorrow is the day of atonement, and I have made a decision, I am not going to fast. Do you hear? I am not going to fast." Wiesel responded, "I understand. You are right. One must not fast. Not at Auschwitz. You must eat tomorrow. You've been here longer than any of us. You must not go beyond your limits. Or tempt misfortune. That would be a sin." "That is not it," said Pinhas, getting irritated. "I could hold out for one day without food. It would not be the first time." "Then what is it?" "A decision. Until now I've accepted everything. Without bitterness, without reservation. I have told myself: 'God knows what he is doing.' I have submitted to his will. Now I have had enough, I have reached my limit. If he knows what he is doing then it is serious; and it is not any less serious if he does not. Therefore I have decided to tell him: 'It is enough.'" When Pinhas was called in the selection that took him to his death, he asked Wiesel to say the Kaddish for him after his death. "But why?" asked Wiesel, "since you are no longer a believer." Pinhas replied, "You do not see the heart of the matter. Here and now, the only way to accuse God is by praising him."18
