W. Dennis Tucker Jr.

*Constructing and Deconstructing Power in Psalms 107-150*

Ancient Israel and Its Literature 19


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This study makes fascinating reading for a reviewer who is nourishing a certain skepticism over against “integral” or “holistic” interpretations of the Psalter. Dennis Tucker of George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University succeeds in portraying the theological, political, and psychological functions of book 5 in the Psalter (Pss 107–150) to the point where even a “nonbeliever” sighs: “There may be something to it. Let’s talk it over.”

Tucker, in this clearly structured book, makes his departure from the plain assumption that book 5 also chronologically forms the hind part of the Psalter and thus must have originated in the Persian period (books 1–3 he puts, with Gerald Wilson, into the exilic period [7]). If that is true, contextual reaction to the dominant imperial ideology may have been inevitable for the composers and redactors of the Psalter. Tucker sets out in chapter 1 (1–18) to sketch that part of recent scholarship that founds or accepts holistic readings of the book of Psalms and betrays inklings of anticolonialist feelings (e.g., Erich Zenger: “Kampfbuch against imperial powers,” 4; Martin Leuenberger: “theocratic Psalter,” 9; Egbert Ballhorn: “Kingdom of God against all enemies,” 12). The second chapter (19–53) exposes what we know of Old Persian, that is, Achaemenid imperial ideology. Witnesses are not a small amount of inscriptions, tablets, statues, excavated
remains of palaces, temples, burial grounds, artefacts, engraved pictures and so on. All government-related objects testify to the enormous self-confidence of representing the (only) world power of the day defending the (only) God-given (i.e., by Ahuramazda) and universally wholesome world order. Possibly, the exclusive highest deity from Persian perspective did rein through all other deities. There is no doubt that the Persian central government wanted to build up this ideology and propagate it into the farthest corners of its immense territory. One particularity of this global political message Tucker stresses time and again in order to show its provocativeness for Judean citizens: the Persians insist (e.g., in the huge Behistun inscription, ordered by Darius the Great) that all subjects accepted “joyfully” the just rule of the conquerors (see 32, 55, 165, etc.). While Isa 44–45 seems to fall into line with this propaganda, “the psalmists provide a thoroughly negative assessment of political power in toto” (58).

Crucial sections of the study are chapters 3 and 4: “Constructing and Deconstructing Power,” parts 1 and 2 (55–137). Tucker tries to prove that booklet 5 (Pss 107–145) in its final form obeys a general anti-imperial drive that can only aim at Persian “colonial” dominance (attested also in Neh 9:36–37?). There are no direct nominations of any Persian entities, names, events, but denunciations of “power by itself” or of the hated “Babylonians” (cover name, Ps 137) in reality are straight condemnations of the political “saviors” commanding world destinies from Susa, Ecbatana, or Persepolis (no references to these centers in the psalms!). How can this hypothesis be verified? Tucker, one by one, goes through all the psalms of book 5 and picks out those that employ political terminology or imagery. They unfailingly, in his view, are to be understood as attacking and deconstructing Persian power in order to build up Yahweh’s kingdom. Resuming the investigation of Pss 107–118 Tucker asserts: “Not a single psalm provides a positive assessment of empire. Although not every psalm … deals with nations and empires, those that do, even in a tangential way, seem to deconstruct the power of such empires” (94). Over against insistent Persian propaganda of joyous acceptance of its dominant rule, which had “seeped into the vast reaches of the empire,” the psalms “provide a subtle, yet important challenge to the imperial claims associated with Persia. … the psalmist asserts that empires continually wreak havoc upon Israel, stripping her of the prosperity she is meant to enjoy” (136).

Thus far Tucker has gone through thirty-seven psalms of book 5, that is Pss 107–144. The rest (Pss 145–150) are, according to his analysis, a separate “extension” of book 5. The slightly smaller part of the total proved to be “political” and “anti-imperialistic” poems (eighteen specimens); altogether nineteen poems go amiss in the discussion because they do not contribute to the topic (Pss 111–112; 119; 121–123; 126–128; 130–134; 139–143). Most of them apparently are too much concerned about individual matters, such as the longest psalm of the Psalter, Ps 119. Furthermore, among the eighteen relevant psalms
there are some that do not easily yield to a “political” interpretation, for example, Ps 109, commonly considered an individual prayer (see 72–78). Neither Zenger’s contention that the neighboring Pss 108 and 110 transform Ps 109 into a communal prayer (76) nor Mowinckel’s and Birkeland’s idea that some I-Psalms in reality should be understood as national laments (75, rejected also by Tucker) actually are convincing. In the end, does this kind of enforced selection of only eighteen psalms for the proposed “deconstruction–construction” theme seriously suggest a “perspective … consistent throughout … book 5” (94)? Further, what about the frequent reliance solely on selected vocabulary of kingship, power, enmity, and nations, which must carry the weight of proof for a tough stand over against the Persian Empire?

Chapters 5 and 6, finally, outline the image of God and the self-estimation of the Jewish community. “Central to constructing their own identity was a reaffirmation of Yahweh and Yahweh’s capacity to deliver his people,” also over against the supreme Persian deity, Ahuramazda (139). Israel’s God is praised as the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, reigning from Zion, subjugating all enemies (Ps 145, almost a Yahweh-kingship hymn, culminates the eulogies [156–61]). The community of believers, for their part, suffers under foreign domination and waits to be delivered by their God, the Overlord of all. Their theological assertions to be the covenant people are to be considered as responses to claims made by the Achaemenid government. Renouncing the official portrayal of happy subjects of all-powerful and beneficent Persian rule, even rejecting any ideal of might and glory, the psalmists challenge their “readers” (!) “to adopt the posture of a poor servant of Yahweh” (169). In accordance, for example, with Zenger, Hossfeld, Lohfink, and others, Tucker sees a certain prominence of psalms centering on poverty and helplessness in book 5, due to having amply experienced “the inefficacy of human power to deliver amid oppression and distress” (170). The prevalence of “a theology of the poor” is then shown by detailed word studies on respective key concepts (174–85). “Rather than recognizing Ahuramazda or any one of the Achaemenid king … as the source of hope, the psalmists turned their gaze to Yahweh, the Divine King. In this figured world, the only hope of deliverance was to self-describe as one who was utterly powerless, and in so doing, trust in Yahweh’s faithful response to them” (185).

Tucker’s stimulating observations rest on the proposition that book 5 of the Psalter was composed under Persian rule, thus reflecting by necessity or sheer contextuality the conditions of those two centuries (roughly fourth and third centuries BCE). In itself this is a laudable assumption—but difficult to ascertain. A later date would seriously blur his distinct references to Achaemenid policies. In the same vein, a stronger recognition of individual backgrounds for each psalm and a lesser emphasis on final redaction would diminish the impressive account of a uniform theology extant in book 5 (Pss 107–145) and further emphasized in the final Hallel (Pss 146–150; see 190–96).
If we accept both premises, that of date of composition and theological refinement, Tucker’s conclusions are intriguing. Still, even then some questions remain. Why do the final redactors not give the faintest indication of which specific imperial posture and religion they are aiming at? Names of kings, governors, deities, and capitals perhaps would have raised suspicions of rebellious agitation, but there would have been specific features of Persian governance and religion (e.g., fire worship, rituals for the deceased, apocalyptic visions, magi priesthood, purity concepts, tributary practices) that could have served as hidden indicators of the imperium. The discrepancy between jubilant reception of Cyrus in 539 by Second Isaiah (Isa 44–45) and the utter denunciation of its imperial practice allegedly found in book 5 of the Psalter needed to be discussed more thoroughly. Psalm 107:7, 16 and Isa 45:2, 13 take opposing stands using much the same wording (64–65), but why is that so? Granted that book 5 of the Psalter was composed and used within the newly emerging Yahweh community of the Persian period, we must consider more profoundly the communal (liturgical) use of the poems. I am very doubtful of private reading practices in the Persian period. Torah was read aloud to the community (Neh 8), and individual meditation (Ps 1:2) probably took place in community schools, as group activities (recitation and repetition).

In spite of my innate resistance to private wholesale readings of psalms in antiquity, I appreciate greatly all colleagues who explore this mode of Psalter interpretation. Tucker’s venture is, as said before, fascinating even to an old diehard Gunkelian.