

The Role of the Psalter in Praying the Liturgy of the Hours¹

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From the solitary recitation of the righteous to the jubilant song of all creation: the significance of praying not just psalms, but the Psalter during the Liturgy of the Hours.

PSALMS AND PSALTER

The Book of Psalms is a collection of one hundred and fifty songs and prayers of Israel. At the time of Jesus, it was already the most well-known and beloved of all biblical books. No book of the Old Testament is cited as often in the New Testament as the Psalms, and it was the book most read in the Qumran community. The popularity of the Book of Psalms did not diminish with the Christian era. From the second century at the latest, the Church made the Psalter her daily prayer book in response to the hymn writing of Gnostic heretics.

These one hundred and fifty songs and prayers are first of all self-contained poems: poems of lamentation, of praise, of wisdom, poems of all kind. Each one is a closed poetic unity that can be interpreted in and for itself.

Furthermore, these one hundred and fifty songs are not just randomly thrown together. Collectively, they constitute a single book. The Hebrews call it *sefer tehillim* (book of praises); Jerome used the term *liber psalmodium*, which is to say “book of psalms,” or, more simply, the Psalter. Thus, the Psalter as a whole is a literary unit that one can read and interpret as such. Systematically assembled in five books, it has a distinctive structure.² Thus, I can interpret a single psalm, but I can also interpret the Psalter, examining the entire book of songs as a single coherent text. In what follows, I will undertake not so much to understand individual psalms as to understand the Psalter. In other

1 Translated from the German by Frankie D. White.

2 Psalms 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150. Each book ends with a doxology.

words, I shall reflect upon individual psalms, but even more so upon the entire Psalter, the Book of Psalms in its unity.³

A simple place to start is with the beginning and the end of the Book of Psalms. For just as in every good book the introduction indicates what the book ought to be about and the conclusion summarizes it, so also in the Psalter the beginning and the end are texts essential for comprehending the whole.

PSALM I

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

² but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all he does, he prospers.

⁴ The wicked are not so, but are like chaff which the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

⁶ for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.⁴

In terms of its form, Psalm I is a beatitude with a longer than usual statement of the grounds for one's being blessed: "Blessed is the man who...."⁵ The psalm contrasts the righteous person with the wicked. Whereas three verses (1-3) are devoted to the righteous one, the wicked (plural) receive but one (4). The concluding verses (5-6) contrast them once again.

Let us take the verses in turn. Verses 1-3 proclaim a man blessed and describe him first through three negations, three things he does

³ On the Psalter as a literary unit, compare N. Lohfink, "Der Psalter und die Meditation. Zur Gattung des Psalmenbuches," Lohfink, *Im Schatten deiner Flügel* (Freiburg: Herder, 1999) 142-162. ET: N. Lohfink, "The Psalter and Meditation: On the Genre of the Book of Psalms," Lohfink, *In the Shadow of Your Wings. New Readings of Great Texts from the Bible* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2003) 75-90; E. Zenger, "Der Psalter als Buch," Zenger (ed.), *Der Psalter in Judentum und Christentum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1998) 1-57.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, English translations of biblical texts are from *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1966).

⁵ On the interpretation of Psalm 1, compare N. Lohfink, "Die Einsamkeit des Gerechten," *Schatten deiner Flügel*, 163-171. ET: N. Lohfink, "The Loneliness of the Just One," *Shadow of Your Wings*, 91-97.

not do, and then through a double affirmation, one thing he does do, mentioned twice.

What does he not do? He does not follow the counsel of the wicked, tread the way of sinners, nor take up a place among scoffers or cynics. At first, this blessed man seems to be alone. The wicked, the sinner, and the cynic are many. The blessed is and remains alone until the end of the psalm where, in verses 5 and 6, the righteous are mentioned for the first time in the plural. Initially, the contrast is one – “Blessed is the man” – against many – “The wicked are not so.” What does this person not do? The three negative statements build to a climax: he does not follow the counsel of the evildoers. He does not listen to them. He does not allow himself to be influenced by them. He does not walk in the way of sinners. He does not act as they do, does not adopt their ways, their examples. He does not join the scoffers. He does not insinuate himself into their circle, does not become a member of their group. Normally, bad company integrates new members according to a certain pattern: it coaxes them, brings them around to adopting its attitudes and points of view until, finally, the new members are fully co-opted. Not so with this person. He refuses this systematic incorporation into their circle.

Now we know why he is alone. He could have had companionship, but he would rather remain alone than allow himself to assimilate into such society. What does he do instead? “He is far more delighted by the wisdom of the Lord, and on his wisdom he murmurs day and night.”⁶ The only company that he has is Holy Scripture. The ways of the others are not to his liking. Only the wisdom of the Lord pleases him. He does not converse with the others. He murmurs God’s law day and night. “Murmur” signifies for the Hebrews what we mean by “meditation.” Psalm 1 opens the entire Psalter in this way because the Psalter is a text that ancient Jews could learn by heart and constantly recite, meditating upon it just as Christians do the rosary or the Jesus prayer or even the Psalter. The evildoer coaxes people, sinners want to entice people from their path, and scoffers are loud. But our righteous man is tranquil. He lives only by contemplation. The psalm does not pit an active evil person against an active righteous person. Contemplation is the way of life for the blessed.

The Psalmist uses an image from nature to compare the life of the blessed with that of the wicked: the blessed is like a tree, while the wicked are chaff. The tree is alone and lonely, while chaff is a band of many. The tree is stable and fruitful, but the chaff is unstable and unfruitful: one gust of wind and away it blows. The blessed man

6 Translation of the author’s German text.

drinks in by contemplation the Holy Scripture just as a tree drinks in water: although this might make him lonely, it renders him solid and fruitful. The psalmist also expresses the difference through the length of his description. He describes the steady, fertile tree: "He will be like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and whose leaf does not wither. And everything that he does prospers." By contrast, the psalmist treats the wicked dismissively: "Not so the wicked. [They are] much more like chaff which the wind drives away." They are already gone: blown away by the wind.

The description of the chaff leads directly to a concluding juridical image. Separating wheat from chaff through winnowing is a common image in Holy Scripture for judgment, and the blowing away of the chaff is tantamount to a guilty verdict. For example, in Psalm (34) 35:5 we see the following:

Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the Lord driving them on!

John the Baptist used the image in a similar way:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Lk 3:17)

Surely, then, the expression "chaff" points toward judgment. In Hebrew, "court" signifies a political assembly and "community," a religious congregation.⁷ Evildoers will not rise up in the political assembly: they will not be allowed to speak, they will have nothing to say. In other words, they simply will have no standing in the political body. As sinners, they would also be shut out of the religious congregation. It is entirely possible that "court" signifies a final judgment, a judicial-religious assembly in the unknown future. Here, for the first time, the righteous appear in number: "in the congregation of the righteous." But that is in the future. In the present, our blessed man still murmurs alone to himself. In an unknown future, they will be many. Like the tree that must stand alone, the righteous person must wait until his time comes to bring forth fruit and to find a like-minded community. The final verse (6) refers once again to the righteous in the plural: "the LORD knows the way of the righteous."⁸ One could also say: The

⁷ *Gericht* and *Gemeinde*, respectively. German text of Ps 1:5: *Darum werden die Frevler im Gericht nicht bestehen, noch die Sünder in der Gemeinde der Gerechten.*

⁸ The plural is more obvious in the German text: *den Weg der Gerechten.*

Lord is familiar with the way of the righteous, the Lord cares for him. “[T]he way of the wicked will perish.” Unless God does something, the way of the evildoer goes awry, slips away into nothingness simply because the Lord does not know this way, is unfamiliar with it.

Who is the solitary righteous man who prefers to murmur Holy Scripture and to remain in solitude rather than bind himself to the company of the unrighteous? The Jewish tradition sees David as the supplicant of the Psalms and the New Testament introduces citations from the Psalter simply with “David says.”⁹ Thus, in the canonical text, David is the solitary righteous man of Psalm 1. He is also the King of Psalm 2. Together, Psalms 1 and 2 constitute the introduction to the Psalter of David.¹⁰

PSALM 2

Psalm 1 begins with “Blessed is the man.” Psalm 2 ends with “Blessed are all who take refuge in him.” In the beginning of Psalm 1, the solitary righteous person “murmurs” the wisdom of the Lord. In the beginning of Psalm 2, the heathen murmur rebellion. At the end of Psalm 1 the way of the evildoers perishes, goes awry. At the end of Psalm 2, the psalmist warns the heathen lest their way be lost. Psalm 1 showed us David in the solitude of meditation and contemplation. Psalm 2 shows him in his public efficacy as the anointed of the Lord.

Psalm 2 comprises four scenes, each marked by changes in location or in narrative voice. The first scene consists of verses 1-3, takes place on the earth, and the psalmist is the speaker. The scene climaxes in verse 3 with a citation of the rebellious people: “Let us burst their bonds asunder...” A change of location occurs in the second scene: verses 4-6 take place in heaven. The narrative voice is again that of the psalmist. And once again, the scene climaxes in a citation (6), as God says: “I have set my king on Zion...”

With verse 7, we are back on earth and the narrative voice is that of the king. The third scene comprises verses 7-9, and again ends with a quotation. In these verses, the king quotes the divine protocol of his installation. Beginning with verse 10, the speaker is either the king himself, or the psalmist. In the fourth scene, in verses 10-11, the rebelling kings receive an ultimatum.

9 Compare Mt 23:43ff; Mk 12:35ff; Lk 22:41ff; Acts 1:16; 2:25, 34; 4:25; Rom 4:6; 11:9; Heb 4:7.

10 On Psalms 1-2 and 149-150 as the framework for the Psalter, see E. Zenger, *Die Nacht wird leuchten wie der Tag*. Psalmenauslegungen (Freiburg: Herder, 1997) 39-69.

The psalm is very clearly constructed. The first and last scenes deal with a rebellious people and their submission to the reign of God. The two middle scenes are about God and his king. It is through his king that God will establish his reign.

- I. 1-3: The rebellion of the nations (climaxing in an unintroduced citation);
- II. 4-6: Change of location: in heaven (climaxing in a quotation);
- III. 7-9: Change of location: on Mt Zion (an "I" speaks and quotes YHWH);
- IV. 10-12: Ultimatum of the "I" for the kings.

The peoples of the ancient Near East were familiar with the situation described by Psalm 2. Whenever a great king died, the empire was unstable as long as it remained unclear who among the remaining princes would ascend to the throne. The rulers of the subjugated peoples, the vassals, and provincial regents all used this instability to rebel against the empire. Stability first came about when a new king was installed who again conquered the subject princes. In terms of its form, Psalm 2 corresponds to an old oriental ritual of royal installation. These consisted of four points:

1. General chaos ensued, which called for a strong man, a king.
2. A king was installed.
3. An installation decree of God was cited.
4. Subjects paid homage.

Psalm 2 contains all four of these elements in sequence. To be sure, by the end of the psalm, we still do not see subjects paying homage, but they have been summoned to submit themselves.

If in Psalm 1, the solitary righteous person allows his life to be determined by the wisdom of God in the face of all the evildoers who surround him, Psalm 2 treats of the active reign of God over the nations through the king of Israel, David, or the Messiah.

Bear in mind that these psalms were written at a time when only the little tribe of Israel knew the God of Israel. All others, Romans and Greeks, Germans and French, Africans and Chinese, had their own gods. The tiny tribe of Israel was sufficiently conceited to assume that, one day, all the nations of the earth would know and pray to their God, the God of Israel.

Today, a billion Christians pray to the God of Israel. Today, the God of Israel has in every nation those who honor him. At the time of the psalmist, it must have seemed a fantastic notion that

the God of the unknown people of Israel could become the God of all peoples.

How will the God of Israel bring the nations under his reign? Through his anointed, the king of Israel. To David and all future kings of Israel, the sons of David, including the future Messiah, God says:

You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel. (Ps 2:7-9)

Thus does the king, the Messiah, subjugate the heathen. It sounds positively brutal. What does the iron scepter with which the anointed should shatter the thick skulls of those who rebel against God look like? In verse 10 we read: "Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth." He persuades them. He appeals to their understanding. The power of the kings of Israel, the power of the Messiah, is a purely intellectual power. His word alone is his weapon. The Revelation of John quotes these words and applies them to Jesus. He, too, had understood that the iron scepter in the psalm is the word. In Revelation 19:15, we read:

From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron....

The iron scepter is a sword of the mouth, a sharp word. At the end of Psalm 2, the king appeals to the reason of the heathen leaders. That is his sword. We must note carefully this point being made at the beginning of the Psalter. It will surface again at the close of the Psalter. The Psalter, a song book, a collection of poems, holds as a weapon the word, song, poetry. Whenever the Psalter mentions weapons, we ought to understand that "a sword of the mouth" is intended: a word, a song, a poem. In Psalm 1, David recites and meditates upon God's word in order not to become like the heathen. As the Messiah of God, he subjects the heathen with his sharp, and therefore divine, words, which are portrayed as a weapon.

THE PSALTER AS A MEDITATION ON THE LIFE OF DAVID

Many psalms have titles, a number of which associate them with particular situations in David's life. Compare the following:

Ps 3: A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.

Ps 7: A *Shiggaion* of David, which he sang to the Lord concerning Cush, a Benjaminite.

- Ps (17) 18: A Psalm of David the servant of the Lord, who addressed the words of this song to the Lord on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul.”
- Ps (33) 34: A Psalm of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.
- Ps (50) 51: A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Thus many psalms are linked expressly to specific situations in the life of David, more so in the Vulgate than in the Masoretic text. The Psalter as a whole, including those psalms expressly ascribed to other authors, such as Korah (Ps [46] 47), or Asaph (Ps [49] 50), is the Psalter of David, because it is a meditation on the life of David. Throughout the Book of Psalms we observe David closely, the same David who was introduced in Psalm 1 as a pious observer of the wisdom of God and who lives by contemplation, who in Psalm 2 appears as king, anointed of the Lord, and with the word as the weapon of God subjects the nations and establishes the reign of God. We see how he rejoices, how he suffers, how he doubts and is distressed, how he struggles internally, and how he curses his enemies: he had indeed no other weapon than word, song, and poem. When Jews refer to David, they mean everything related to David, to the people of Israel, and, above all, of course to the future son of David, the Messiah and his messianic people. Likewise, the Church always reads the Psalter as a meditation on Christ and on his people, the Church herself. David and Jesus are the anointed of the Lord who, alone and surrounded by enemies in Psalm 1 meditated on God's will and, with God's word as a divine weapon, subjugated all the heathen.

Whoever, then, meditates and recites the Psalter to himself, meditates on the life of David and Jesus, meditates like the anointed of God who, from the strength of his solitary contemplation, established the reign of God over all the people, meditates in distress and suffering, in joy and inner turmoil, with light thoughts or more dark ones, until, at the end of the Psalter, the goal is achieved.

Everything flows into and culminates in the Hallelujah Psalms, (145) 146-150. The end of the Psalter, the great *Hallel*, is a constantly expanding song of praise. It begins in Psalm (145) 146 with the song of an individual:

Praise the Lord!
 Praise the Lord, O my soul!
 I will praise the Lord as long as I live.... (Ps [145] 146:1-2)

The next psalm expands the praise of this individual voice, the praise of David, into praises voiced by all of Israel:

Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God....
The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel.
(Ps [146] 147:1-2)

Psalm 148 swells Israel's praise into an encomium sung by all creation:

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his host! Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! (Ps 148:1-3)

With that is the apex reached. Through all his struggles, the anointed of God has united the chosen people of Israel, all heathen, and the entire cosmos in a great song of jubilation. Psalms 149 and 150 close not just the great *Hallel*, but the entire Psalter, thematizing once again the progression from the solitary recitation of David in Psalm 1 to the jubilant song of praise of the entire cosmos in the great *Hallel* of Psalms 146-150.

PSALM 149

Psalm 149 narrows our gaze from all of creation, which sings out Psalm 148, to focus again on Israel. As far as its form is concerned, Psalm 149 is a hymn, a song of praise. Once again, we start with an invitation to praise: "Sing to the Lord a new song." Verses 1-3 repeat this invitation in various forms, and verse 4 introduces a reason for praise: "For the Lord takes pleasure in his people." Verse 5 again issues a summons to exultation: "Let the faithful exult in glory...." And the very end of the psalm provides another reason for praise: "This is the glory for all his faithful." Verses 5-9, therefore, duplicate the structure of verses 1-4, each unit opening with an invitation to praise and closing with a reason for praise.

In the first half of the psalm, verses 1-4, the summons to praise is repeatedly varied and renewed, showing thereby who should sing to the Lord and how to sing. Who should sing? "The assembly of the faithful" (*hasidim*): "Israel," "the children of Zion." And in verse 4: "For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory" (*anawim* here means humble/meek). And how should they sing? With dancing, timbrel and lyre!

The second half of the psalm, beginning in verse 5 with a new summons to praise, also tells us who should praise. In verse 5, the "faithful" from verse 1 appear again. Here, however, their descrip-

tion is not detailed. We know now that the faithful are the poor of Israel, the true, poor, humble Israel. What the psalm does more fully describe here is how they should praise him:

Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches. Let the exaltations of God be in their throats like a two-edged sword in their hand (literally: a “double-mouthed sword”), to wreak vengeance on the nations, chastisement on the peoples. To bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron. To execute on them the judgment written; this is glory for all his faithful ones.¹¹

All of a sudden, the musical instruments of the first half of the psalm – dances, timbrels, and lyres – have become weapons: a sword, chains, and shackles. Of crucial significance is what I have here translated with the term “like”: “Let the exaltations of God,” i.e., the high praises of God, “be in their throats like a two-edged sword in their hands.” The Hebrew text uses *waw*, a word with many possible meanings, among which “and” is the most basic. This “and,” however, is what the rabbis call a *waw aequationis*, an “and” that serves to equate the terms it joins. “And” does not add the weapons to the songs; rather, it identifies the weapons with the songs. The songs are the weapons, a double-edged sword or, as the Hebrews say, a “double-mouthed” sword. Just as, in Psalm 2, the Messiah uses an iron scepter, that is, the word of his mouth, to bring the heathen under the reign of God, the true Israel of God uses its two-mouthed sword to aid God in his task. The sword of the holy is their songs: songs in their throats, which are like double-mouthed swords in their hands. In the course of the Psalter, David bore many curses in his heart, and he might really have wanted to shatter some people because of their violent tendencies. Curses in the Psalter are forthright expressions of the frankly vengeful wishes that we all entertain when forced to look on powerlessly as the weak are exploited. Everyone knows such feelings; not always are they unjustified. The Psalter repeatedly expresses such candid feelings. In the end, however, David, Jesus, and all believers must transform the maledictions they have verbalized to accord with the songs of the Psalter. This transformation is an important process that those who pray must make in praying the course of the Psalter: they must melt their weapons into songs. Songs are the only weapon of believers: “Let the praises of God be in their throats – like a two-edged sword in their hands.” What does this mean in practice?

When Nebucadnezzar had the three youths thrown into the fire, what did they do? The Book of Daniel records their prayer:

11 Translation of the author’s German text.

And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed'nego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. And they walked about in the midst of the flames, singing hymns to God and blessing the Lord. Then Azariah stood and offered this prayer; in the midst of the fire he opened his mouth and said: "Blessed art thou, O Lord, God of our fathers, and worthy of praise; and thy name is glorified for ever...." (Dan 3:22 ff.)

The three youths in the fiery oven are ready for martyrdom and are singing. This is their victory. After the fire of Rome, when Nero allowed the Christians to be martyred in the Vatican gardens and to be burned as living torches, the Christians, to the amazement of the pagan Romans, began to sing songs. They went to their death singing. Because of this, Romans converted in droves to Christianity. Nero's plans for the Christians went askew. Another example: do you know how hymns were introduced into the Latin Church? Augustine explains it in his *Confessions*: how Ambrose of Milan resisted the Empress Justina with the weapons of Christians. The empress wanted to exert her authority against Ambrose. So, he began to write hymns (e.g., *Veni Redemptor gentium*), and the faithful overcame the empress with songs. Augustine writes:

Not long since, the faithful of the church in Milan had begun to find mutual comfort and encouragement in the liturgy through the practice of singing hymns, in which everyone fervently joined with voice and heart. It was about a year earlier, not much more, that Justina, mother of the boy-emperor Valentinian, had been persecuting your faithful Ambrose, in the interests of the Arian heresy by which she had been led astray. His God-fearing congregation, prepared to die with their bishop, your servant, stayed up all night in the church.... It was then that the practice was established of singing hymns and psalms in the manner customary in regions of the East, to prevent the people losing heart and fainting from weariness. It has persisted from that time until the present, and in other parts of the world also many of your churches imitate the practice: indeed, nearly all of them.¹²

Singing songs while prepared for martyrdom, that is the weapon of the faithful: "High praises of God in their throats – that is like a double-edged sword in their hand." Even in our day, Christians go

12 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* IX.7.5, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. I/1: *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, OSB, ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA (Hyde Park NY: New City Press, 1997) 220.

singing to their death. On 16 November 1989, as the El Salvador military murdered six Jesuits and two women at the Central American University, these died praying and singing. Shortly thereafter, the murderous military had to consent to peace in the civil war, the very thing they had wanted to hinder with the murder of the Jesuits. David and Israel, the Messiah and we Christians have no other weapons than our songs. But our trumpets demolish the walls of Jericho, though of course only when we, like the first Christians, are prepared to witness to the Messiah with our blood.

Right from the start, in Psalm 2, the Psalter contends that the iron scepter of David, the weapon of the Messiah, is the word, speech. Throughout the Psalter, David, and with him everyone who prays, experiences joy, doubt, sadness, anxiety, and inner turmoil. But by the end of the Psalter, all the weapons of the faithful are transformed into songs. The Psalter itself is the weapon of David, of Christ, and of believers. Quite rightly, as king, David is always portrayed with a harp. Other kings bear swords. David bears a harp. The musical instruments of Psalm 149, dance, timbrel, and harp, are presented as our weapons. By itself, Psalm 149 may be a matter of interpretation, but its place in the context of the entire Psalter leaves no question. The Psalter closes with Psalm 150:

Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament!

² Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his exceeding greatness!

³ Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!

⁴ Praise him with timbrel and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!

⁵ Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

⁶ Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Only the musical instruments remain. With that ends the great *Hallel*; and with that ends the Psalter. By that time, all of Israel, all believers, and even the whole of creation have united in the great cosmic hymn of praise.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LITURGICAL PRACTICE

The liturgy can and should include psalms, as it both prays the individual poems and proclaims them as liturgical readings, just as encountered in the Mass and other services (baptism, funerals,

etc.).¹³ The Liturgy of the Hours, however, not only prays the psalms as individual prayers, but also, and quite rightly, the entire Psalter as a unity, as a single biblical book. Furthermore, in principle, the book is to be read in its canonically given organization. To be sure, the *Rule* of Saint Benedict relaxed the more ancient principle of following the biblical sequence in praying the Psalms, but adhering to the canonical organization remains nonetheless the fundamental principle.¹⁴ The view attributable to form criticism research, that the Psalter is the “songbook of the Jewish Community,” increasingly leads to the notion that it makes no liturgical sense to pray the Psalms in canonical order.¹⁵ In fact, one would not simply sing the hymns in a modern hymnal in sequence, but would select and assemble individual hymns appropriate for the occasion. But the Psalter is not such a hymnal, nor was it ever such in Israel. The discussion taking place in recent years in the Anglican Communion regarding whether the Liturgy of the Hours ought to abandon the traditional biblical ordering of the psalms should in no way align itself with outmoded early scholarship and exegetical theories! The Anglican Communion (and not it alone) would be well-advised to remain with the traditional practice. It is simply biblical.

Of course, in my private prayer I can select psalms for my every actual, personal mood. There is a deeper meaning, however, in praying plaintive psalms when all is going well, and singing praises when a more somber mood prevails. In the first place, I pray the Psalter not only privately, but always with David and Israel, Jesus and the Church. And these always have something to lament somewhere, even if I personally do not. I can, therefore, join myself to them. Moreover, the Church also always has something somewhere in the world to praise, even if I, personally, have no reason to do so. In the Psalter, I deliberately transcend the boundaries of my private moods and thus provide the text of the Psalter the opportunity to take them up and transform them.

Athanasius of Alexandria, whose *Life of Anthony* advanced, more than any other work, the ideal of the monastic life as a spiritual struggle against spirits, wrote in a letter to Marcellinus what one such

13 The synagogue apparently did this early on. See the title of Psalm (91) 92: a Song for the Sabbath.

14 *Regula Benedicti* 18 [Chapter 18 in *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry, OSB (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981).]

15 H. J. Kraus, *Psalmen, Biblischer Kommentar* 15/1 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961) vii. See also the discussion between Gunkel, Begrich, and Mowinckel in Zenger, “Der Psalter als Buch,” 2-6.

desert Father had handed down to him regarding the special role of the Psalter in the Bible:

Indeed, in the remaining books of Holy Scripture, you hear only Law that mandates what you should do and what you may not do. You hearken to the prophecies simply so you know that the redeemer will come.... On the other hand, whoever reads the Psalter not only experiences these things; he studies in it the movements of his own soul and obtains insight into them.... Thus will each person have the experience that these divine songs were created for us and for the stirrings and sensitivities of our souls.

(PG 27.12ff)

A further point: the cursing psalms also belong to the Psalter. In the entire drama through which David lived, these are of deep significance and cannot be set aside. God's word must not be censored. It actually is not permitted to censor it. In a "psychology of prayer," not only do expressions of praise and significant prayers have their necessary place, but also curses: all are embedded in the entirety of the Psalter.

The Psalter, which takes up, expresses, and transforms every possible mood and wish of David, of Christ, the son of David, and of every person who prays, should not be mutilated. Cursing psalms and cursing verses in the psalms belong to the words of prayer that the Holy Spirit has gifted to Israel and the Church. *Quod non assumptum non redemptum* – the ancient christological maxim pertains even here: what is not assumed is not redeemed. Only when everything that is human is taken up will one finally somehow be able to say: "I am prayer" (Ps [108] 109:4).

The Psalter, therefore, is a text for meditation, a meditation on the life of David. More precisely, the Psalter is a Torah meditation in five books, a meditation pentateuch. The one who prays unites himself with David and journeys with him throughout his life. We are in direct conversation with Mary through the rosary, and gaze with her and in the reflection of her countenance upon the mystery of the life of Jesus. Likewise, in the recitation of the Psalms we unite with David (or Jesus, the son of David). With the aid of his Torah-true life and his striving after the Torah, we meditate with him on the wisdom of the Lord, the instruction of the Fathers. What David does in the first Psalm, murmuring, reciting the Torah of the Lord day and night (Ps 1:2), we do with him, not that we recite the Torah directly; rather we recite and observe the Torah-abiding life of David lived in the Psalter.

Because the Son of David made, and makes, the words of David his own, the Psalter is also Jesus' meditation on the Torah. Hence, in the Psalter, as nowhere else in Holy Scripture, except in the high-priestly prayer of John 17, we become witnesses of the conversation between the Father and the Son – and the Church, since in the *totus Christus*, Christ the head is always joined with his body, the Church. Whoever prays the Psalms enters into this divine conversation, at the same time a conversation of God with David, with Israel, and with the Church.

The Psalms, like the rosary with its Our Father and one hundred and fifty Aves, are prayers using God's own words; indeed, in the case of the Psalms, they are the words of a divine conversation. Whoever unites himself to David and Jesus, and with them pours out his entire heart to God, including curses and maledictions, can experience with them the transformation described in the Psalter's drama of David.

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