

Mark W. Elliott, St Andrews: 'Biblical praise and poetry: the ecumenical significance of the Psalter.'

*1. Psalms before and after the Reformation*

The Reformation Psalters united Reformed Presbyterians across the British Isles and 'Anglican' Christians within England. Such a large amount of unity in forms of worship was remarkable yet it came at a price: Roman church with its less than completely bible-centred liturgy was the common enemy in a rallying-cry to order worship after the bible and a less hierarchical and hierophantic way. But what if the common enemy was the devil and his works, injustice and complacency, fear and hostility? In truth, *those* are the things the Psalms take on. In any case there became a view that for Protestants the part of the bible most obviously to do with spirituality should be regularly read and then sung in Sunday worship and at other times, in a way unimaginable to Catholics of that time. It was an arrogation by lay people of the monastic tradition, as it were. Yet to his credit, Archbishop Cranmer preserved the psalter rescuing it from the wreck of the monasteries, for it to be used in daily offices.

For the medieval monastic tradition, including that stemming from Augustine had privileged the whole of the Psalter: Ambrose took from east the antiphonal singing of Psalms and added some hymns (Martimort, *The Church at Prayer. I. Principles of the Liturgy*, 51.) But Augustine would argue that a psalter is very different from cithara. In *Enarratio in psalmum 32* he explains the difference to consist in a sound box's location in the lower or upper part of the instrument G Clark, 'Psallite Sapienter: Augustine on Psalmody', in Andreas Andreopoulos, Augustine Casiday, Carol Harrison (eds.), *Meditations of the heart: the Psalms in early Christian thought and practice : essays in honour of Andrew Louth*, Turnhout, Belgium : Brepols, 2011, 163). Augustine could affirm: 'God is music, because God is supreme measure., and in creation gives measure to the universe. Music on earth brings order and calm, but it also arouses emotion and increases awareness of time-bound existence.' (Clark 2011, 177)

That forms of praise was once a uniting force sounds odd, when after all churches today fall out about that almost more than anything else, even within congregations. (Things like the Oxford movement, Pentecostalism, Orthodox *ressourcement* were factors for division that the Reformation church could not have foreseen!) Yet, one cannot blame the Psalms, whatever other conflicts of 'choral versus folk' mass or 'drum kits versus organs'. For the Psalms are 'there' and they are 'given',

although we might be tempted to 'edit' them. Most if not all Christians traditions recognize the Psalms in their worship, even if some are more selective than others. A last attempt at a Catholic prayer book in Catholic England was the 1556 *Book of Hours*, (London),—designed with lay people in mind, as primers in reading and basic theology, including the Paternoster, Ave Maria, Creed as well as the seven Penitential Psalms. In her recent book *Miserere Mei* Clare Costley King'oo actually demonstrates how the Psalter was used, even pulled part in the later Middle Ages, and not seen as a whole. (In fact Augustine on his deathbed according to Possidius's *Vita Augustini* had the penitential psalms, and those only put on the wall; so the practice of selecting those goes some way back.) Putting it more positively one might claim that at least 'the Psalms of Ascent' (Pss 120-134), and especially the seven penitential Psalms, stood as 'representing' the Psalter in the books of Hours, volumes which became popular among the better sort of lay people. As she writes (*Miserere Mei*, 31): 'In the early *Horae* the seven psalms were usually glossed with a illustration of David repenting [note also the use in suffrages for deceased— especially Psalms 6 and 129 (the *de profundis*) 25f.] but from the end of the fifteenth century they were more often marked out with a depiction of David peering at Bathsheba.' In other words there was a turn from focusing on David's penitence towards considering his sin. Even penitence seemed to have had its day as something to be experienced, anguished over. In terms of the post-Tridentine liturgy in the RCC except on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, whole psalms were not recited, but merely excerpts of one or two verses.

Today in Protestantism the Psalms are no longer at the heart of the main services, with the exception of the Free Reformed churches. In the early Reformation, English Reformed Psalter paraphrases took the place and kept out certain things associated with liturgy. J. Witvliet (*The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 108-110) describes how the Psalters to be used in New England were predictable in their choice of rhythm. Both the Ainsworth Psalter and the Bay Psalm Book employed the '8:6' common meter almost throughout, in contrast to the French Genevan Psalter, which had been their inspiration had used 110 different meters for 150 Psalms!

Today the Psalms *cannot* be said to shape the Holy Communion services of Anglican communion, even while there is usually a Psalm as one of the four readings every week. It functions as 'just a reading', although in the Morning Prayer service it might be sung. There is a sense in which Morning and Evening prayer forms in the

Book of Common Prayer are heavily creation-focused and that is in part to do with the use of Psalms and other texts that echo that focus. One might want to consider the beautiful musical settings, but form cannot live without content. Musical settings might allow there to be a common appreciation, yet what is the content of that vessel? The words carry their own force. For that reason perhaps musical accompaniment of them tends to be relatively plain: chanted. R Hooker saw this: 'it pleased the wisdom of the same spirite to borrowe from melodie that pleasure, which mingled with heavenly mysteries, causetgh the smoothnes and softnes of that which toucheth the eare, to conveye as it were by stelth the treasure of god things into mans minde.' (*Ecclesiastical Polity* ch 38.1). There was an awareness in the tradition that musical accompaniment could be two-edged. Augustine was always aware that music could be a force for bad as well as for good: so worship had to be mindful, and singers had to be conscious of the words they were singing.

Luther did not equate polyphony with disharmony but insisted on singing in unison as a way of avoiding the temptation to 'performance', although unity would be the effect. In medieval thought, music after all came close to the Word of God, in that it was the last step or subject in the *quadrivium*, the preparation in the arts for theology students. In his Table talk (LW 54, 129) Luther mentions Josquin and is aware how well music helps people to understand words. Paul Westermeyr ('Theology and Music for Luther and Calvin' in R. Ward Holder (ed.), *Calvin and Luther: The Continuing Relationship*, Göttingen: V&R, 2013, 59) informs us that women and children would sing one octave above the men. 'Lutherans sang chorales in unison, their choirs sang polyphonic settings in alternation with the congregation (ibid.)'. In Reformed settings 'the Old Hundredth' tune ('All people that on earth do dwell') by Louis Bourgeois, with paraphrase by William Kethe was as good as it got in terms of tunefulness. *Solo psalterio* (Psalms alone) was the watchword for Calvinists, who moved closer to Augustine with suspicion of instruments; yet they imposed harsher musical restrictions and by excluding non-biblical texts too. With respect to the Psalter Calvin had more of a theological agenda than Luther and saw Psalm singing as helping a congregation be the space where God could be 'enthroned on the praises of Israel.' (Christian Grosse, *Les Rituels de la Cène* (Genève: Droz 2008), 176: 'Le Psautier encadre encore la manière dont le fidèle se nourrit des Ecritures. Médiateur privilégié—avec la prédication—de l'accès à la Parole divine, il propose une selection de texts bibliques à portée normative, du point de vue de la foi...'). This helped establish a people separate from the world, for whom the singing of the words produced an effect,

‘provided they be associated with the heart’s affection.’ (See *Institutio* III.x.31). ‘Holy’ was only that which was of the Holy Spirit. ‘Unlike the early church which used what it inherited from the synagogue, Calvin broke with the Church’s musical past.’ (Westermayr 2013, 60)

In early modern Reformed controversies, Moses Amyraut insisted that a Church that read the Psalms together, stayed together. Yet the Reformed Church could not simply allow the Psalms to have a liturgical purpose without using them as a resource for theology, and this from the time of Bucer and Calvin onwards. One does not find much to argue about in the sense of interpretations of the Psalms running along confessional lines. Of course there are different views of what the Kingdom is, and how Jewish the Messiah figure was. Sujin Pak has observed this (*The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms*. Oxford U.P., 2009), with Calvin eventually being accused of Judaizing by the Lutheran Hunnius. Theological and polemical quarrying of the Psalms began with Martin Bucer, in contrast to Bugenhagen’s non-theological interpretation. However, the tradition of finding doctrine in the Psalms goes back to Lombard, and behind him, Augustine. Having said that Bellarmine’s commentary on the Psalms is completely non-controversial and speak of Christ as the reality in which believers are to find spiritual protection. It might be wiser to take the Bugenhagen-Bellarmino approach as more promising for receiving the texts in the way they were meant, that is, to give spiritual support and uplift.

Psalms are about us, or at most our experience of God, our ‘spirituality’; they seem to avoid the sharpest points of doctrine. This immediately strikes one as anthropocentric, but the point is that these texts take people out of themselves, among other things.

## 2. *What do the Psalms give?*

There is plenty reflection on life: death; suffering, anger, hope. There *is* instruction in the Psalms, but they are not primarily of that genre. Even ‘blessed is the man who stands...’ is more a description, in a way like Jesus’ beatitudes. It is not a matter of legislation. There are elements which sound at times far from ethical, amoral even, although if we get caught condemning the excesses of Ps137, then perhaps we have missed the point and should be careful about glorying in our ethical performance. In

any case, a book like the Psalms doesn't talk so much about ethics as it reports on 'life before God', *vita coram Deo*.

Certainly modern readings like those of Bernd Janowski emphasise that what afflicted the Psalmist was despair, not sin and moral culpability. Desolation is what 'the abyss' in certain Psalms represents: the problem is not that God is judge, but that He is not there. Hans Küng once put it today it is not whether a gracious God can be found as Luther asked, but whether God exists. Against this David Yeago defended Luther: if one looks carefully at what Luther actually wrote before 1518 (as distinguished from his reminiscences twenty or twenty-five years later), one discovers that the celebrated question "*How can I get a gracious God?*" is conspicuously absent.... The driving question in Luther's early theology is, in fact, "*Where can I find the real God?*" All the evidence in the texts suggests that it was the threat of idolatry, not a craving for assurance of forgiveness, that troubled Luther's conscience. (D. Yeago, 'The Catholic Luther', *First Things* 1996)

However the point remains that idolatry as a religious force gone wrong might not be the issue. Rather there is a widespread fear today that nothing is there. The Psalmist however reassures us that divine care is constitutive of being human. As Janowski puts it: 'The human being is human, according to Psalm 8:4-5, because YHWH is mindful of the person and benevolently looks after each one (cf. Ps144:3)' (B. Janowski, *Arguing with God A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, Louisville: WJK, 2013, 53.) The verb *pqd* (to care for, to see to) is an intensification of *zqr* (to remember). The person is one who is growing into space made for her by God: one should remember dialogic quality of the human being in Hebrew Bible. 'This idea is well expressed in Psalm 8, when the question of human beings—"What are human beings?" (v.4/5a)—is answered in reference to "remembering" by YHWH .. Human beings live and are human because God remembers them and cares for them (cf. Ps.144:3) or even more as they examine their "heart" and direct it towards God, characteristically adapting the idea of God's remembering, as in Job 7:17-18.' (Janowski, *Arguing*, 12). In all this there is no possibility of objectification, but only of an openness towards God. Mindful means 'providential mindfulness' (Janowski, *Arguing*, 53). But is not that humans are something, that God remembers them? Surely divine providence is only part of who/what humans are: by creation humans are granted a degree of self-determination according to some creaturely autonomy.

On the basis of this created worth God is mindful, rather than inferring that there is no worth, and that God gives worth first through his remembrance and care.

However one might well agree that 'Life means connectivity'—within the self, to others, and to God—this, at the heart of Ancient Near Eastern Religion, according to Jan Assmann's *Tot und Jenseits im alten Ägypten* (München: C.H.Beck, 2003.) The Psalter is a book for living, as when Luther speaks of the Psalmist's heart on the open sea (1528 *Vorrede*), yet kept safe or granted protection by the words. One might compare the idea of the Psalms as a spiritual temple or great house, with the 1st psalm as main door to the rest of the building (Jerome).

However the Psalms were not experienced as mere texts, at whatever point of Israelite, Jewish, and even Christian religion. Song seems important in 1Chron & 2 Chron 29:26-30, where one learns that psalms were used in public worship. The fragment found in a number of Psalms (100:5; 107:1; 118:1; 136:5), namely: 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel' is a refrain there and also at Nehemiah 4:9, 12. With music comes memorization, and many Psalms titles were actually giving the tune. There are cantillation marks even in the Masoretic Text, and the point is, as Wenham precisions it, memorization goes with 'authority', and thereby the text becomes part of character, in a way illustrated by Ezekiel and his scroll (cf. Jer 36). Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher writes that in Psalm 45 the lyric 'I' is reduced to the function of communicating and the message; it is as an overflowing vessel and pen nib. With this metaphor of ecstasy and music a claim is made on the audience, that the author is an instrument of the divine voice. Athanasius observed that music harmonises the mind, and body consequently in turn. (*To Marcellinus*). The Psalms do have a way of bringing things to the surface that needs to happen if we are not doing our theology out of anger, moralism or even of laxity and indulgence.

Does the Psalter suggest unity? Well, yes in that in the fullness of time various varieties of Psalms came to dwell in the same collection. David Psalms, Zion Psalms, Wisdom Psalms, Priestly Psalms ('sons of Korah'?: 42-50; 62; 72-85). There has been a pleasing symmetry in Psalms research over the last few decades: Zenger and Hossfeld, themselves inspired by Norbert Lohfink. Zenger questions whether the psalms were simply 'accidentally' thrown into the basket; surely they were arranged there, for it makes a difference whether one eats a strawberry before or after an onion! Can a Psalm have a wider sense without losing the original one? He then shows examples of connections: Ps50-51; 79-82; 84-86; 106-107 as well as groupings

of Psalms such as 3-14, 25-34. And yet we read or hear one Psalm at a time, even while we are aware of its 'co-texts' among the Psalms. Understanding the first three Psalms will give a key to getting the best out of the Psalter. The mockers of Ps. 1 grow to become the crowd of Ps. 2. The introductory psalms set up living space for biblical spirituality. If Ps. 2 introduces kingship, where God speaks, Ps. 3 encourages the worship of response, but also prayer (p. 50). Usually only the first two Psalms are seen as forming the 'double gate' (the *Doppelportal*), as per Zenger and others, but Beat Weber (*Werkbuch Psalmen I*; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001, *ad loc*) insists on the contribution of Ps. 3 as well. Thus Moses (Ps. 1) hands the baton to the prophets announcing the Messiah (Ps. 2), and then to David as singer (Ps. 3), which is just as important for David as torah-wisdom and kingship. The one constant is Zion. Frank Hossfeld, starting from the end of the Psalms has declared Psalm 139 as the high point, where knowledge of self and God come together. Psalms 120-134 re what can be described as 'The Pilgrim Psalter', 'probably created in Jerusalem around 40CE, for use as a prayer- and songbook both for organized pilgrimages in the context of the annual pilgrimage feasts, and also for recitation (with musical accompaniment) at worship services distant from Jerusalem, as well as for use in families and for private devotions' (F.L. Hossfeld & E. Zenger, *Psalms III* (Minneapolis: Fortress/ Hermeneia, 2011, 4). Then 'the Pesach [Passover] Hallel Psalms 113-118 and the immediately preceding Torah Psalm 119, as well as the twin Psalms 135 and 136, which were redactionally tied to it, gave it a Torah-theological and historical-theological horizon that pointed especially to the canonical history of Israel's origins from the exodus to the occupation of the land, as well as the recollection of the destruction of Jerusalem and the sufferings in exile, none of which was contained in the Pilgrim Psalter. It also acquires, through the Torah mysticism of Psalm 119, a suggestion of how to live in one's concrete daily life.' (*Psalms III, ad loc.*) The last grouping of Psalms (138-145) and the finale of Pss 146-50 pay tribute to a world order, life-advancing in its principle, in which 'poor Israel' can trust (7), although the Zion-centrism of the finale is more marked. The doxologies of Ps41, 72, 89, 106 and 145 mark off a five-part Torah of David. But 146-150 shows that praise has the last word. With Robert Alter (*The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary*, Norton, 2007, introduction), if there is a point to the whole, this is emphasised in the last six psalms: *a call to celebrate God's greatness*—which is of course not quite the same thing as celebrating God's goodness. The choir or 'presider'/precentor is to lead by singing proclamation and expecting response to what Ps 145 tells us: God's power and yet mercy to all he has made. Or as Hermann Spieckermann (*Heilsgegenwart eine Theologie der Psalmen* [Göttingen: V&R, 1989], 28) has it, the Psalms is what the Old Testament is leading up to. So it is the high point,

from which to look back to the rest of the Old Testament, and also forward, but also around and upwards. It provides a theology of God's transcendent glory: divine glory, not that of humans.

Part of the decline of a form-critical approach which asked 'what function in what setting does each type or form of Psalm have' was due to the realization that indeed there is usually a mix of genres contained in each psalm, as these were stitched together in a time after the Exile. Any given Psalm might call individuals to take responsibility for expressive worship; the hymn of praise (*Lobdank*) usually comes after a lament prayer (*Bittklage*) and these have a reciprocal relationship somewhat like major and minor keys (*Moll/Dur*). (See Beat Weber, *Theologie und Spiritualität des Psalters und seiner Psalmen (Werkbuch Psalmen, Band 3; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010)*. Psalms also run into each other such that one can speak of grouping of Psalms. Some scholars like G.H. Wilson (*The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter, Scholars Press, 1985*) have suggested that the history of Israel provided a spine or a thread to link the Psalms together. Thus with Psalm 89 the Davidic kingdom ends, while Books 4-5 of the Davidic Pentateuch respond to the situation of exile. In all this there is a linking and a developing, a few degrees of separation in terms of theme. There is not so much 'old hymns and new' as much as development, re-interpretation by association. In our hymn books this seems less the case; we rarely work in a continuous way. The Psalter provides a strange familiarity: the words can sound old, not least in the cadences of the Coverdale version or Luther's translation or the Geneva Psalter, but under the varnish there are depths which challenge and refresh. The Psalms probably do need to be preached, to allow the familiarity to be cracked open.

### *3. Method and Metaphor*

Speaking of God: (and his Messiah-Christian reading will not force a Christological meaning, but will be open to it.) Biblical theology, and that often means a theology led by the categories of the Hebrew Bible/OT involves things that bother us: and are common to us. The Psalter contains all the other parts of the OT. Yet the problem is



that we fall out over the NT. What it does do is tell us that there is more to the life of the faithful than all those important things given attention in the later document.

It occupies the middle ground between doctrine and ethics, for it speaks of spirituality, presence, prayer and attitude. The Psalms offer what might be described as Metaphorical Theology. Janowski sees metaphor as coming from the sensory and the visual perception and only secondarily expressing itself in language and help to make more abstract ideas graspable. Light is not simply 'brightness', but the removal of darkness, as with every morning in everyday experience; only in act is there God and light, crucial to being rescued from death, against a backdrop of static non-being. Like the Sun, God touches everything and is its judge, yet is also guide: 'For thou hast delivered my soul from death, yea, my feet from falling that I may walk before God in the light of life.' (see B. Janowski, 'Das Licht des Lebens' in *Metaphors in the Psalms*, 110-113.)

Likewise in his *Seeing the Psalms : a theology of metaphor* (Louisville, Ky. ; London : Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), William P. Brown attests how Ps 107:23-40 describes the sea as dangerous, requiring God to step in after urgent petition. Psalm 78 tells how God can divide the sea—and split rocks, causing streams to come out. To Brown these seem like metaphors, with a strong attachment to the literal sense: 'the death-dealing cosmic waters become life-sustaining in the desert' (Brown, 111). Because water can be both, the use here needs to be metaphorical. But does it have to be metaphorical to be both? It is the literal that is needed in drought, or needs to be avoided in flood. This is an example of what L. Ryken had in mind in his 'Metaphor in the Psalms' (*Christianity and Literature* Vol. 31, No. 3 (Spring 1982), p. 9-29): commentators are often poor at saying what (e.g.) 'horn' is literally and just generalise, and so miss the metaphorical sense in e.g. Ps 148:14 ('The Lord has raised up for his people a horn'). 'The corrective action is double: first we must take the time to let the literal situation sink in, and then we must make a transfer of meaning(s) to the topic or experience that the poem is about. Commentary on the Psalms by biblical scholars tends to obscure these acts of identification and interpretation. There is an unwarranted willingness and even a readiness to reduce metaphor to a single abstract meaning.' (Ryken)

However, Brown can also be faulted for being *too* literal. Clearly when in Psalm 56:8 God gathers the tears in a flask as a record of grief, that is not so much a metaphor, but an anthropomorphism of poetic and touching quality. To claim further: "The implication is clear to record the psalmist's complaint, God must , as it were drink the psalmist's tears' (Brown, 119) is to push it too far. To his credit, however Brown

rightly observes that the Psalms leads us into thinking about the dark side of existence. Psalm 69 cries with real urgency about waters coming up to neck, and yet that reality is 'slander' (or is it more like a physical danger in Ps 69:15: 'Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me'—for, has anyone ever died from mere slander?) In any case, slander, insult and false accusation crush the psalmist. Yet the resolution is how God turns a situation of *Chaoskampf* (a problematic term according to Jon Levinson) into salvation: by the end of the Psalm God is leading the natural elements in a dance. In Psalm 77:16-20 Chaos and the Red Sea are brought together, yet one belongs to prehistory while the other to salvation history, or more precisely to the judgement of divine anger, as God comes those who seek darkness and not his face, and preserved only a remnant. Where Brown maintains that in the notorious Psalm 88 the abyss has become God himself. I think once again, this is to exaggerate.

Last among Brown's examples which I want to consider, Ps 42 contains a recollection of the mighty falls at Hermon; there is also the tidal wave of worship. He writes:

Striking is the psalmist's claim that the overpowering billows are of God, not of chaos. Are the pounding waves, then, the instruments of God's wrath meant to drown the psalmist? Nowhere is reference made to divine judgment (contrast Psalm 88). The psalmist exhorts herself to be patient in hope, not contrite or broken in spirit. She is not obliged to render restitution. Sin and judgment find no place in this psalm. Rather, the psalmist discerns something profoundly liturgical about "deep call[ing] to deep," something irresistible in the peals of praise and thanksgiving issuing from the temple. She does not founder before God's mighty waves; to the contrary, she identifies God's billows with *hesed* (v.8)! As God stirs the stormy waves, so God "commands" steadfast kindness.' (Brown,133)

This is very much a mixed metaphor, where it is hard to know what is bitter and what is sweet. 'Over me' means something that seems like curse but is blessing. God is there by metonymy, but the metaphorical usage implies that the reality can be both painful even while salvific.

As with Janowski's article, some of the main themes of the Psalms are 'light' and 'life' as the connective of humans to God. This will also feature strongly in John's Gospel, especially in its use of Ps118 and given more theological precisions; but it is good to see the source of these metaphors. Life as a principle of strength appears in many Psalms, such as Ps 15:1: 'YHWH, who dwells as a guest in your tent, who lives on the mountain of your sanctuary?' The God of life seems to be very much mixed in with his creation, yet is always more than it. Christiane De Vos in her 'Es gibt mehr Felsen in Israel' (in P. Van Hecke/A. Labahn (ed.), *Metaphors in the Psalms*,

BETHL 231, Löwen 2010, 1–11) makes it clear that ‘temple’ itself can be a metaphor, e.g. in Psalm 71 ‘...nämlich dass Gott selbst ein unangreifbarer Schutzraum ist...Die Nähe Gottes wird deutlich in räumlichen Kategorien gedacht...Jeden Felsen mit dem Zion und jede Burg mit dem Tempel gleichzusetzen, ist unbegründet.’(11) Nevertheless, God is bigger than the temple: the rock on which it sits is one special example, but his presence is not limited to it, according to the Psalms.

To specify the theme of ‘life’, in Psalm 16 it is God who gives community and is ‘land’ and leads us: a fullness a satiation of good things and joy (contrast Ps 16:11 with 88:4). Ps73 fulfills the promise sketched in Ps 16, we see God taking on and overrunning the sphere of death. Psalmist hopes for protection and protection that endures (Kathrin Liess, *Der Weg des Lebens*, Mohr Siebeck 2004, 442-5.) It seems that the Psalmist is not actually in death, but is just very close, and here Liess agrees with Schnocks against Crüsemann on Psalm 88, who thinks the Psalmist ‘dead already’ (and thus she also close to Christoph Barth’s conclusions in *Die Errettung vom Tode. Leben und Tod in den Klage- und Dankliedern des Alten Testaments* (3.Aufl. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1997). The point is Ps 16 is more about protection from death, than deliverance out of it, and is similar to Psalm 23. There is not some sort of more dualistic intensity, since God is in the events and bigger than them. God is as *Lebensraum* for Psalmist, as for Levites. ‘Leben ist mehr als die bloße physische Existenz; Leben heißt heilvolles und erfülltes, bei Gott geborgenes und von Gott geleitetes Leben.’ (Liess 2004, 443.) Liess speaks of Psam 16’s introducing a *Lebensgemeinschaft* with God which safeguards against death in life (Liess, 444f); furthermore, Psalm 73 sees this relationship as overcoming death, even where there is a scepticism about any nexus of deed and reward.

The overall vision of the Psalms then is a unitive and life-inspiring one. The God of the Psalms is both personal and beyond personality in the human sense. Van Hecke, in his introduction to *Metaphors in the Psalms*, xxvii; ‘The descriptions of the natural phenomena accompanying God’s revelation (smoke, fire, thunder and lightning, hail and coal), should not be regarded as metaphors, according to [Kristin] Nielsen, but as metonymies, since the natural phenomena are no images for God’s presence, but are understood as consequences of God’s actions.’ Metonymically God has a dwelling place; metaphorically he is a dwelling place. Nielsen herself has added:

‘A Biblical Theology must include the personal aspect of God. On the other hand, God should not be reduced to what is characteristic of a person. God is more and God is different. Therefore, the Bible describes God by such a variety of metaphors that it is impossible to transform them to just one

metaphor, not even the one that most Christians favour: God as father. The meaning of the impersonal metaphors is to remind us that there is more to be said about God than just saying God is like a human. God transcends the boundaries of human life. And the meaning of personal metaphors is to underline the relationship between God and man.' (K. Nielsen 'Metaphors and Biblical Theology' in P. van Hecke, *Metaphor and the Hebrew Bible*, Leuven: Peeters, 2005, 264.)

#### *4. Conclusion: Implications for Ecumenical Theology*

With all this in mind, how are we encouraged to think that these experiences can promote unity among believers? Well, first, there is a proof text, as it were: Ps 133:2: 'Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.' The next lines of this tiny Psalm speak of the simile to such peace as like oil on Aaron's beard, then of the dew of Hermon on Zion, an event which would be rather supernatural, even the divided kingdom reunited: 'sitting' ; there Lord gives life for evermore . Eric Zenger comments that here Zion is a basis for eternity (*Psalms* III, 481-2): 'the time indicated by the article, "until the eternity" (עַד־הָעוֹלָם:). This psalm lies within the horizon of this festal theology, according to which the human being, in enjoying the festival, transcends her or his limited "human time" and participates in the "eternity of God's time," while it also corrects that "festal theology". (Cf. Jan Assmann 'Der zweidimensionale Mensch: das Fest als Medium des kollektiven Gedächtnisses', in

Assmann, Jan ; Sundermeier, Th. (Hrsg.), *Das Fest und das Heilige. Kontrapunkte des Alltags, Studien zum Verstehen fremder Religionen 1*. [Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1991], 13-30.)

Second, the locus of all this is that which moves lives, and lives in community. Of course there is the danger with so much emphasis on the imagination that it's all a matter of our minds and even feelings which create the imagined reality. Is there a reality as when the Psalmist says: 'Hear my voice Lord when I cry to thee for mercy?' Metaphors are meant to help draw the imagination in and thereby move people, all of which might be reinforced by music. But there is no sense that one is to think of a lowest common denominator of emotion or conviction. These were real lives, lived before a real God, such that wills and deeds and habits as well as momentary feelings were engaged. According to their perception, God acts in the human psyche in a way that parallels his activity in the external world. For example, nobody would claim that God is angry in the same way as humans are, but it is quite another thing to insist that there is nothing in God to which wrath corresponds. His anger inspires burning shame and righteous indignation, depending on the situation.

Third, it is someone else's reality from a long time ago. Metaphors were part of their way of coping with very real situations. Yet these belong to the past in their otherness and distance from us. If the historical critical approach becomes the only method then, for all it claims to keep the pastness of the past, it can sometimes serve to abolish that, since through all its objectifying and taming, it ironically disarms it: this was Gadamer's concern in his *Wahrheit und Methode*. But 'canonical reading' at its best will mean taking the Psalms as Scripture, thereby fixing a respectful distance. This emphasis on the final form does not mean a fossilizing of the living experience but distillation, after refining. It matters that these Psalms are written by and for a covenant people; the creation imagery (including those with 'pagan' associations such as 'the Sun') takes the believers in that community 'out of themselves', yet the metaphorical sense is one that is usually theological and ecclesial: as the church looks to creation and God's providential care, that very creation reflects meaning back to the things of the church: its *new* life, its *spiritual* protection, its *peaceful* order.

As Christians aiming to work together, some of this might appear to be a distraction from pressing issues, whether doctrinal or ethical? I have learned much from those

who have set out positions that favour one interpretation over another in NT interpretation. I think of Knut Backhaus on Hebrews, or Thomas Söding on Galatians, and on the Protestant side, Ulrich Wilckens on Romans. One does not want to reach a common denominator but to triangulate reflection from different starting-points involving sharp discussion as well as mutual understanding. The Psalms do not offer such obvious points for disagreement. Yet in digging deep in those texts and feeling the impact of their metaphors and rhythms, one might come to grasp a ground out of which different NT theologies have grown, and finally get round to discussing the comparatively few points of doctrine that divide us.

### Select Further Reading

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Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.