

## The Psalms as the Hymnbook of God's People

“It would not be unfair to say that research into the Psalms in this century has had a largely negative effects on the Psalter's reputation as the natural focus of Israelite spirituality, and much that we heretofore prized in this domain has undergone a somewhat reluctant re-evaluation”. James L. Kugel

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION: THE DE-SPIRITUALIZATION OF THE PSALMS

Various scholarly processes do this today:

- 1) “The Death of the Past” is now the demise of Christian historiography and of the doctrine of providence as creatio continua. J. H. Plumb in 1968 is only the first of many since then, to view history as anthropology, no longer theology.
- 2) Receptor Commentary is now historico/theological reporting in the history of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. Susan Gillingham, Psalms through the centuries, Blackwell, 2008, now illustrates this future trend
- 3) Meanwhile “historical criticism” invades into and remains “the hinterland of devotion and faith” which is the history of the use and interpretation of the Psalms. Now each psalm is viewed as a “fragment” whose source is Canaanite, Ugaritic, Babylonian, Persian, Qumran, etc, etc.

### 2.0 “HINGE PERIODS” OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY

The primitive church was a “singing community” whose creeds were sung in worship, alongside of the Psalms in synagogal worship. Only in distinguishing Jews from Christians in reign of Nero onwards did the Apologists introduce a new historical departure.

HIPPOLYTUS (170-236) recognized the David of the Psalms no longer as only a historical king, but as the prototype of the “Anointed One”. He now is selective of Psalm authorship also. He sees the Psalms as “a revision of the rest of Scripture”. Indeed, the Psalms are the glorious school of grace

JUSTIN MARTYR (d. 162-7) in Polemic against the Jews, initiating a new Christological thrust that is following the New Testament apostles as the new key to the Psalter

ORIGEN (c. 185-254) is the first serious exegete, and combines the rhetorical skills of the Greeks with new Biblical skills of exposition.

1. “His prosopological approach”, i.e. identifying the speakers in the psalm, as the subject addressed, or the one anticipated. Hence in Ps. 2:1-4, Origen assumes it to be the lines spoken by the angels; Christ then speaks to relieve us of our yoke. He sees Ps. 2:7 as God the Father speaking of His Son.
2. “Spiritual exegesis” follows, since “all Scripture is God-inspired”. The purpose is more than to become a biblical exegete, but to be nurtured in holiness.

3. Yet, Origen is also “figural” as a Neo-Platonist in culture if not in theology. Today we are confused how far the “figural” should be allowed to expand over “the literal”, from this Origenist/classical heritage.

EUSEBIUS (c. 260-340), bishop of Caesarea, assumed he was heir of Origen’s scholarship, but as the Church’s first great historian his Onomasticon and Church History provided the topographical and the chronological framework for “literal exegesis”. He sees the rebellion of Psalm 2 as that of Absalom, and the “spiritual exegesis” as anti-Jewish.

THEODORET OF CYRUS in late 4<sup>th</sup> century is likewise “a moderate historicist”. Later “hinge periods” are the era of Constantine; the Carolingian Renaissance of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Bernardian/Cistercian revival of the 12<sup>th</sup> c., Devotio Moderna and the Flemish renewal of the 14-15<sup>th</sup> c. and conciliar reforms; then of the Reformation.

### 3.0 AUGUSTINE AS AN ALLEGORIST

Augustine (354-430) was a rhetorician by training, so allegory was his genre, intensified by his Neo-Platonism and his Christian vision of it in The City of God. The insurrection of the world against Christ’s rule he sees all the time, while he assumes little profit in tracing the original context of the psalm; for he is not a Hebrew exegete; and he sees the Psalms as written to foretell the New Testament. From the Donatist Tychonas, he interpreted all Scripture from “The Rule of Faith”, so the figural interpretation provides “depth” for the applicable meaning, for the whole Body of Christ. His exposition enarratione was set each Sunday for 18 years within the recitation of the psalms by the congregation. This strong liturgical use of the Psalter emphasized his use of the Psalms as totus Christi. His commentary was comprehensive of the whole Psalter, often with two versions of his homilies. They were expressive of his “mature ministry”, because he delivered them late in his life as bishop of Hippo. It became his custom to have a Psalm in the Sunday worship, for which he then expounded, to embrace also the parochial issues of that week. He defends this approach from Ps. 102:18 – “Let this be written for another generation” arguing there is little profit to be had from examining the original context of the psalm since it was written to foretell the New Testament. “The Rule of Faith”, i.e. the apostolic writings have a regulatory function over the Old Testament. A figural interpretation is vital to provide ‘depth’ for meaning, to reaffirm the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. Hence “the spiritual meaning” is the ultimate of the text. Later, this was misused in the clericalism of the Western Church to exclude the lay readers from having access to the Vulgate vision, other than in the vernacular access to the Psalter.

Hilary of Poitiers (c. 320 – 367) is a counter to Augustine, for unlike Augustine he is not polemical but grammatical, but his commentary is fragmentary.

### 4.0 ALEXANDRIAN-ANTIOCHENE SCHOOLS OF EXEGESIS

Origen dominates the Alexandrian approach as Neo-Platonix, figural and applicative. Yet we see Athanasius as his own master. Scarcely “Alexandrian”, the Cappadocian Fathers

are also applicative, especially Basil the Great (330-79) and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 325-94). They see the Psalms as man's ascent to God, with a progressive sequence in the Psalter. Again the homilies are fragmentary.

Diodore of Tarsus (d. 394) founder of the Antiochene school, bishop of Tarsus (378) is the defender of orthodoxy against Julian. In Ps 119 he states "we much prefer the historical sense to the allegorical". He assigns many psalms to the reign of Hezekiah (Ps. 14, 15, 20, 21, 27-30, 32-34, 41 and 48).

Jerome (342-420) made such revision of Old Latin, Greek, and Hebrew text, based in Origen's Hexapla. In 402, he wrote explanatory notes on the psalms and later wrote an elaborative commentary. He rejected the inspiration of the Septuagint, and made his commentaries more "literal" than "figural". He turned against Origen.

John Chrysostom (347-407) has homilies on 58 psalms. He sees God speak with precision (akribeia) in the text to deal with human weakness, so he is pastoral in his teaching. He is reluctant to use allegory.

Theodore of Mopsuetia (350-429), bishop of Cilicia wrote on 81 psalms, dates them to Babylonian exile and Persian restoration, but his Christology is suspect as "Nestorian" and later condemned.

Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393-460), a bishop of Syria, commented on all psalms in Syriac text. Later the Cappadocians his intent is pastoral.

## 5.0 MONASTIC COMMENTATORS OF EARLIER MIDDLE AGES

Cassiodorus (c. 485-580) advocated the primacy of the psalms for immature Christian. He used the psalms also as a text for rhetoric in classical education. Defender of orthodoxy in Council of Chalcedon in 451, he integrated faith and scholarship in the seven liberal arts.

Bede (673-735) and Alcuin (735-804). Second Council of Nicaea (787) required all bishops to know Psalms by heart. Now various Carolingian monastic schools produced several distinguished commentaries – Harmo (d. 855), Remigius (c. 841-908). In 811 Charlemagne issued capitulary: "Are we really Christians?" He became "David" to his courtiers, so the Psalms was key to his reform. Later monastic commentaries continued the devotional use of the Psalms: Rupert of Dentz (d. 1129); Honorius Augustodunensis (d. 1156); Anselm (c. 1033-1109); Gerhoch of Reichersburg (c. 1093-1169). Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) has 18 homilies on Ps 91.

## 6.0 CHRISTIAN HEBRAISM IN LATE MIDDLE AGES

The 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century as "a hinge period" of history. Note it changes. A fresh encounter occurred between Jews and Christians. The use of "glosses" in text by Gilbert of Poitiers (d. 1154). The elaboration of "the four senses" by Stephen Langton (d. 1228). The

Victorines, especially Andrew of St. Victor (d. 1162) elaborated a source of authority. Commentary was seen to be “progressive”. Alongside “cathedral schools” were now the universities. Commentaries became the littera, senses and sentential. But Psalms commentaries became eclipsed by other Biblical books, and a stronger lay series of commentaries on the Psalms occur, e.g. on the Penitential Psalms (Richard Rolle, exceptional).

Peter Lombard (1100-60), Richard of St. Victor (d. 1175), Herbert of Bosham (1120-94), Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), Solomon ben Isaac/Rashi (1040-1105), Joseph Kara (1050-1125) all wrote Psalm commentaries.

Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349) wrote a massive Biblical “postillae” verse-by-verse commentary. It greatly influenced Luther later – “if Lyra had not played harp, Luther would never have gone dancing”.

Conciliar commentators use: Pierre d’Ailly (1350-1420), Jean Gerson (1363-1429), Denys the Carthusian (d. 1471), Jacques Leferre d’Etaples (1460-1536).

## 7.0 ‘THE PLAIN TEXT’ OF THE REFORMERS

Martin Luther (1483-1546) is in transition from Medieval to Modern exegesis. His lectures of 1513-1513 were on Ps 1-126 using closes of Augustine, Jerome, and Cassiodorus. His premise is Christological, with four-fold method of interpretation. He began a second commentary in 1519-20, but ceased at Ps 22. In 1531-33 he writes summaries of the Psalms, seen five genres in the Psalms: prophecy, teaching, consolation, prayer and thanksgiving.

Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560) has commentaries on Ps 1-60, 110-133.

Martin Bucer (1491-1551) set the Psalms to metrical hymnody and set a standard of commentary Calvin later admired.

John Calvin (1509-64) takes the role of the mind seriously as a humanist, while his legal studies gave him clarity for “the plain meaning of the text”. He adopted the early Fathers in a “Rule of Faith”. He is restrained in his prophetic typology and consulted Hebrew scholars. Yet the Psalms reveal “all parts of the anatomy of the soul” before God. The Psalms were his first commentary of 1552. His text is both remarkably “truthful” and yet also so “personal”.

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