

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

# SINGING THE COVER VERSIONS: PSALMS, REINTERPRETATION AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY IN ACTS 1-4

JAMIE A. GRANT, HIGHLAND THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE, SCOTLAND

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, I heard my ten year old daughter singing a song under her breath as she was setting the table. ‘Oh, “The Bangles,”’ I said, pleased to have dredged from the depths of my memory the name of the 1980s band that I had listened to in my youth. She stared at me blankly and said, ‘No, “Atomic Kitten.”’ My heart sank as I recalled having similar conversations with my parents, not so very long ago! Later I heard the song being played on the radio – the same words, the same basic melody but with a much more contemporary feel to it. The words of the song still ‘spoke’ to a new generation of music lovers, but it had been ‘reinterpreted’ for that new community.

We can observe a similar phenomenon with regard to the psalms and their use within the biblical canon. The Psalter is the most quoted OT book in the NT,<sup>1</sup> yet even a quick and cursory analysis of the NT authors’ appropriation of verses from the Psalter shows quite clearly that they have reinterpreted these poems around the Christ-event for the benefit of their own generation, the first Christian community.<sup>2</sup> This general observation gives rise to several questions that strike me as relevant to the task of

---

<sup>1</sup> S. E. Gillingham comments that ‘the Psalter is used more than any other book for a prophetic purpose (Isaiah, Deuteronomy and Exodus are also used frequently, but well over a third of the 360 OT references are from the Psalms)’, (*The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible*, [Oxford: OUP, 1994], 264).

<sup>2</sup> W. O. E. Oesterley, for example, speaking of the use of Psalm 16:8-11 in Acts 2:25-28, comments, ‘This is an illustration of the way in which isolated passages [from the Psalms] are interpreted in an arbitrary manner without taking the context into consideration, and thereby entirely missing the meaning of the passage. Other instances occur of a similar character’, (*The Psalms: Translated with Text-Critical and Exegetical Notes* [London: SPCK, 1959], 96).

biblical theology, especially with regard to the creation of models for biblical theological praxis.

The questions that spring to mind include: Why is the Psalter most often adopted to illustrate the teaching ends of the NT writers? Is there something inherent to psalmody that permits the (obviously) christological reappropriation adopted by the NT authors? Is this reinterpretation hermeneutically 'legitimate' or is it, as is often claimed, another example of text-twisting to meet the ideological ends of a new body of readers? Also, just how representative is the Psalter as a text when it comes to christological reinterpretation of the type observable in the NT's use of the psalms? Are there principles at work that can be applied to a Christian interpretation of other OT texts? Or is the Psalter sufficiently unique to invalidate it as a paradigm for biblical theology?

Obviously, the task of biblical theology goes far beyond the singular issue of the NT's use of the Old, however, this issue is central to the practice of biblical theology.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is important for us to examine the interpretative principles that are at work in the NT writers' appropriation of the Psalms and to inquire as to how these may shape our own approaches to biblical theology. Obviously, to examine the use of the Psalms in the whole of the NT would go far beyond the reasonable scope of a single article, therefore, our analysis shall focus on a more manageable

---

<sup>3</sup> Childs is absolutely right when he suggests that, '[T]he modern Christian theologian shares a different canonical context from the early church. The first Christian writers had one testament, the modern Christian has two', (B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal* [Facets Series; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002], 53). However, analogy drawn from the NT writers' use of the OT should probably play a significant role in our discussions of biblical theological method. Childs goes on to note that, 'there is an obvious analogy between the early church's reinterpretation of the Jewish scripture in the light of the Gospel and the modern church's use of two authoritative testaments', (53). Longenecker comments, 'The New Testament's use of the Old Testament is a subject of perennial interest and vast dimensions. It involves a number of important theological issues... [T]he subject is a vitally important one', (R. N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Era* [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 1). Whilst the NT writers' interpretation of the Old is not *the same as* biblical theology, it is undoubtedly worthwhile asking whether their treatment of a single authoritative witness – as part of a developing second, canonical witness – can inform our understanding of how these two (now closed) *corpora* relate to each other.

passage (Acts 1–4) as a paradigm in order to see what conclusions it may yield.

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT USE OF THE PSALMS

The first question that we need to address is why the Psalter provided such rich pickings for the NT writers in their intertestamental deliberations? Each of these authors, to varying degrees – no doubt reflecting the composition of their diverse audiences – sought to present the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as fulfilment of OT messianic promise. Eschatological hope in a future Davidic king who would restore the fortunes of Israel was widespread in first-century Palestine and was grounded in the OT itself and heightened by the teachings of the intertestamental period.<sup>4</sup>

Even a cursory reading of the NT citations from the psalms makes it clear that the NT writers adopt verses from the Psalter to a decidedly christological end. This appropriation of the psalms around the figure of Christ follows three distinct strands: first, the evangelists present Jesus adopting the psalms as his own prayers; secondly, the psalmic references to YHWH, and his works, are presented as being equally applicable to Jesus himself; and thirdly, the psalms are presented as having a prophetic role, predicting especially the trials and sufferings of Christ.<sup>5</sup> Each of these three aspects of the NT appropriation of the psalms is interesting in its own right, but it is probably the ‘prophetic’ aspect that sheds most light on the

---

<sup>4</sup> Of course, opinions differ with regard to the nature and extent of messianic expectation around the time of the writing of the NT. Some suggest that there is, in fact, only limited and isolated indication of messianic anticipation, whilst others would say that messianism was rife at this time, although it does seem that the latter view has gained the ascendancy in recent years. The diachronic debate is not of great relevance to this article. The NT authors present in their writings a historical milieu of messianic expectation and use the psalms as a vehicle to establish that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah that they saw alluded to in the OT. The question that we seek to answer in this article is why they chose the psalms to meet this particular end? (See *Eschatology, Messianism and the Dead Sea Scrolls* [eds C. A. Evans and P. W. Flint; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997] for fuller discussion of the messianic themes prominent in the Qumran scrolls.)

<sup>5</sup> K. Möller, ‘Proclaiming the Reign of Christ the Lord: The Psalms in the New Testament’, *Praying by the Book: Reading the Psalms* (eds C. Bartholomew and A. West; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 149.

issue of christological readings, NT interpretation of the Old, and biblical theology.

What becomes immediately obvious is that the NT writers reread texts which originally applied to the Davidic king as referring to Jesus. A few examples from our sample passage in the early chapters of Acts will suffice to make the point here. Peter, during his foundational Pentecost sermon, cites Psalm 16:8-11 (a 'Davidic' psalm)<sup>6</sup> as being ultimately fulfilled not in the life of the historical king but in the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:25-36). Later in the same pericope, Peter adopts another 'David' psalm (Ps. 110:1) to indicate that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is not the end of the story, but is a stepping-stone on the way towards his current heavenly reign (Acts 2:34-35). This passage is followed by the account of the healing of the lame man by the Temple's Beautiful Gate, the arrest of Peter and John and their release from custody in Acts 3-4. It is interesting that in their communal response to the threat of persecution, the early Christian community again turns to the Psalter (Ps. 2:1) for a 'prophetic' explanation of current events (Acts 4:23-31, esp. vv. 25-26). It is striking that within these first four chapters of the Book of Acts, Luke makes two further references to the Psalms in order to make a particular point regarding the ministry of Christ and his people. The apostles quote Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 in order to establish that Judas should be replaced

---

<sup>6</sup> For many years Psalms scholars simply ignored the superscriptions entirely as being late, midrashic and unimportant. However, in recent years an increased awareness of their significance has come to the fore. The preposition used in many of the Davidic superscriptions (the Hebrew *le* preposition, i.e. *ledavid*) is notoriously difficult to translate. It may be an authorship designation (i.e. 'by David'), or an indication that the psalm was written as some sort of tribute to the king (i.e. 'to/for David'), or it may simply be an indication of type (i.e. 'of David,' a David-type psalm). The real significance of the superscriptions is not so much with regard to questions of authorship, but in terms of the canonical shaping of the Psalter. It appears that superscriptions were used subtly by the Psalter's editors to indicate groupings of psalms that should be read together, each in the context of the others (see Gerald Wilson's helpful work for further discussion, e.g. *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* [SBLDS 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985] or 'The Shape of the Book of Psalms', *Int* 46/2 [April 1992], 129-41). However, the significant factor from our perspective is that Davidic superscriptions – even if not taken as indications of authorship – imply some sort of association with the Davidic monarchic line (see J. L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994], 87-98, for helpful discussion of the association between 'David' and psalmody).

by another, and Peter – in his defence before the Sanhedrin – cites Psalm 118:22 to point out that Jesus is the cornerstone rejected by the builders (Acts 2:11).<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the first and most apparent observation to be made with regard to the adoption of verses from the psalms in the Book of Acts is that the psalms cited do not seem to be ‘about’ the points that Luke is making.<sup>8</sup> In Psalm 16 the writer speaks of the ‘eternal life’ that is secured for him in relationship with YHWH in a spiritual sense<sup>9</sup> and, whilst the historical setting of the psalm most cited in the NT is notoriously difficult and controversial, in all likelihood Psalm 110:1 is the psalmist’s prophetic declaration regarding the Davidic king of his day.<sup>10</sup> Psalm 16 is not immediately referring to bodily resurrection and Psalm 110 would be understood as referring to an historical Davidic king. Writing about messianism in the OT, Longman highlights this interpretative tension:

---

<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are many further uses of the psalms throughout the NT, but the Lukan usage in the early chapters of Acts can be treated as representative of the christological type of interpretation that is apparent throughout the writings of the various NT authors and genres – each seems to adopt the psalms in the same ‘prophetic’ sense, somehow pointing towards the Christ event. The high density of citations from the psalms seems to indicate two relevant considerations: (1) That the psalms, amongst all of the OT canonical texts available to them, played a prominent role within the life of the first Christian community; (2) That the psalms provided rich pickings for the NT writers to make their point that Jesus of Nazareth was, in fact, the promised Messiah.

<sup>8</sup> This would be true of psalmic citations in other parts of the NT and their appropriation by other NT authors, so Luke should not be considered idiosyncratic in his interpretative techniques. Similar examples may be drawn from the Pauline (Eph. 4:8) or Johannine (John 19:24) *corpora*.

<sup>9</sup> ‘As the beloved of Yahweh, he will never see the lower depths of the underworld. He knows that love, which attaches him to God, will not be ruptured by death. On account of the Presence, the prospect of annihilation in the underworld has vanished’, S. Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 178-9.

<sup>10</sup> Opinions regarding the details of the original historical setting of this psalm vary greatly, however, most commentators see the words of this psalm being voiced by the psalmist and addressed towards the king as Israel’s ‘anointed one’. See, for example, Oesterley, *Psalms*, 461; Terrien, *Psalms*, 752 and L. C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150, Revised Edition* (WBC 21; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 111–14 for discussion of the various possible backgrounds and settings.

If we restrict our focus to passages in the Torah and the Writings, we come to the following observations. In the Torah the word is almost exclusively used of an anointed priest and in the Writings of an anointed king. However, in both cases... the word is used to refer to a present not a future priest or king. The term's [*masiah*] occurrences do not in and of themselves justify the expectation of an eschatological figure, either priestly or royal and certainly not prophetic.<sup>11</sup>

The psalms adopted by Luke in Acts 1–4 refer to ‘a present not a future’ reality, in Longman’s terms. Psalm 110 is grounded in the reality of the events of *human* kingship and it is not immediately obvious that Psalm 16 is even connected with the *human* king, let alone an eschatological figure.<sup>12</sup> So is there any justification for the Lukan and apostolic use of the psalms or is this a hermeneutical quantum leap of the type that Oesterley bemoans above?<sup>13</sup>

#### PSALMS, INTERPRETATION AND REINTERPRETATION

Part of the problem with regard to our appreciation of what the NT writers do with the OT text is that we compare *protos* and *telos* without asking what processes were at work in between. We contrast origins and end results without asking about any intermediate processes of interpretation that may make the transition less stark. There is a basic dynamic of

<sup>11</sup> T. Longman III, ‘The Messiah: Explorations in the Law and Writings’, as yet unpublished paper (at the time of writing), H. H. Bingham Colloquium in New Testament; McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, Canada, June 5th, 2004, 5.

<sup>12</sup> There are, however, indications from the content and context of Psalm 16 that, although not explicitly ‘royal’ in the same way as we would understand Psalm 110 to be a royal psalm, it may well be rooted in a monarchic setting. See J. H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (2nd ed., SBT, vol. 32; London: SCM Press, 1986), 66-7 for discussion of possible royal indicators in the content of Psalm 16, and P. D. Miller, ‘Kingship, Torah Obedience and Prayer’, *Neue Wege der Psalmenforschung* (eds K. Seybold and E. Zenger; Freiburg: Herder, 1995), 127-42 for discussion of how the canonical context of this psalm within a pre-existing collection which was later incorporated into Book I of the Psalter further indicates the possibility of a royal background to Psalm 16. See J. A. Grant, ‘The Psalms and the King’, *Studying the Psalms* (eds P. S. Johnston and D. G. Firth; Leicester: Apollos, 2005) for discussion of explicit and anonymous kingship within the Psalter.

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 2 above.

psalmody which must be remembered if we are to give Luke (and the other NT writers) a fair hearing over their use of the psalms. The dynamic in question is the process of *reinterpretation* that is inherent to the ahistorical literature of the Writings.

Apart from the superscriptions the psalms are, along with the wisdom literature, the one large block of biblical literature that is not related to any particular period in Israel's history.... The stories of Joshua are rooted in color and content in the beginnings of the nation Israel. Many of the prophets have a universal message, but that is properly cloaked in a particular setting and related to a particular prophet. The looseness of the psalms from all that historical rootage is not a problem but a gain and opens up interpretive possibilities.<sup>14</sup>

The ahistoricity of the psalms is significant when it comes to assessing how they are appropriated in the later biblical literature. This unusual<sup>15</sup> lack of historical setting has a profound influence on the intertextual adoption of the Psalter and, as Miller puts it, this 'is not a problem but a gain [that] opens up interpretive possibilities'. Certainly, this seems to be the attitude of the earliest Christian writers who clearly viewed the Psalms as material that opened up all sorts of hermeneutical possibilities enabling them to make their christological point.

The essence of the issue lies in the long-standing tradition of personal appropriation of the 'typical' human expression of the psalms. Lack of concrete historical setting has, from the earliest days of psalmody, meant that subsequent generations of readers and singers of the psalms have applied the thrust of a given psalm in many different ways. The despair which a psalmist expresses at the opposition of enemies may well originally have been rooted in the king's response to the antagonism of neighbouring nation states;<sup>16</sup> however, such historical insight is not

---

<sup>14</sup> P. D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 22-3.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, there is much debate about the actual historical setting of many narrative texts, however, even where this is the case there is a canonical self-presentation of historical context – Deuteronomy presents itself as a series of Mosaic sermons delivered on the plains of Moab, the Book of Isaiah is presented as the gathered prophecies of the eighth-century seer, etc. Apart from certain psalmic superscriptions (discussed below), the Psalter lacks this type of implicit historical setting.

<sup>16</sup> There are many psalms where this scenario could have provided the original backdrop, but Psalm 17 would be one example among many (Eaton, *Kingship*, 33-4).



provided for later generations of psalm lovers.<sup>17</sup> Readers given no access to the original context read only of despair due to the enmity of anonymous individuals and so – quite naturally and without massive interpretative leaps – they appropriate the prayers of the psalmist as their own when they face opposition of a very different type in the home or the market-place. The contexts of psalmist and pray-er of the psalms may, in fact, differ vastly, but lack of historical contextualization gives rise to almost infinite possibilities for reappropriation. The emotional and psychological pain of the psalmist seems similar to the current experience of the reader and so his words are adopted as the prayer of a later generation.<sup>18</sup> This generic nature of psalmody inevitably leads to a constant process of reinterpretation with the change of circumstance and context.

This same process of reinterpretation may be applied more broadly within the Psalter. As time passed and daily reality changed, the understanding of the psalms would also change. We have discussed this on an individual level in the preceding paragraph, but the same processes would also apply on a national level. According to Gunkel's classifications, several poems found in the Psalter are best understood as

---

<sup>17</sup> The only exception to this principle of ahistoricity is to be found in the thirteen psalms which specifically refer to events from the life of David (e.g. Pss 3:1, 18:1 or 51:1). Ironically, it is questionable whether these superscriptions do actually historicize the text. Brevard Childs, for example, argues that these historical superscriptions merely provide the reader with an example of *the type of setting* in which a psalmic prayer may be voiced and that they in no way limit the appropriation of the text in other settings ('Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis', *JSS* 16/2 [Autumn 1971], 148). Similarly, Gerald Sheppard argues that 'the history-like superscriptions show no interest in the older cultic setting of the psalms but focus instead on the specific personal circumstances that enable these prayers to be "overheard" or similarly reused', ('Theology and the Book of Psalms', *Int* 46/2 [April 1992], 147).

<sup>18</sup> Miller again expresses this well, 'the psalms are not related to a specific person although they are highly and deeply personal. They are not bound to the experiences of one individual and her or his personal history. They are by definition typical, universal. They were composed, sung, prayed, collected, passed on because they have the capacity to articulate and express the words, thoughts, prayers of anyone, though they do not necessarily do that. They speak to and for typical human situations and thus have the capacity to speak to and for us as typical human beings. They have to do with experiences of human existence, not just Israel's existence or that of one human being' (*Interpreting*, 23).

royal psalms (hereafter, RPss).<sup>19</sup> The RPss category is not really a genre classification at all, it is, rather, a grouping dictated by content and not form. Gunkel himself admits as much when he comments that, 'The internal unity of [these] psalms'<sup>20</sup> stems from the fact that they are *concerned entirely with kings*.<sup>21</sup> So we have a group of psalms in the Psalter that are in some way connected with the monarchy of Ancient Israel, especially with the Davidic monarchic line. Some of these psalms seem to find their original *Sitz im Leben* in royal coronation or enthronement ceremonies (e.g. Ps. 2<sup>22</sup> and possibly Ps. 72<sup>23</sup>), some are prayers for the king prior to battle (e.g. Ps. 20<sup>24</sup>) or thanksgiving songs of the king after battle (e.g. Ps. 21<sup>25</sup>) and there is even one poem which finds its origins in a royal wedding (Ps. 45.<sup>26</sup>) The important thing to remember for the purposes of our discussion is that these psalms are closely connected with historical realities of kingship in Israel and Judah.<sup>27</sup>

Why is this historical origin significant to our current discussion? The answer lies with the retention of the RPss in the canonical Psalter. If we imagine the scenario that presented itself to the editors of the Psalter at the time of the formation of the final 'Book of Psalms' as we know it, it is remarkable that we have any RPss in the Psalter at all. Clearly, there were many more psalms in circulation than those that made it into the book's

---

<sup>19</sup> H. Gunkel, *Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (trans. James D. Nogalski; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 99-120.

<sup>20</sup> Pss 2, 28, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, 144:1-11.

<sup>21</sup> Gunkel, *Introduction to the Psalms*, 99.

<sup>22</sup> Terrien, *Psalms*, 87.

<sup>23</sup> J. L. Mays, *Psalms* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 236.

<sup>24</sup> G. H. Wilson, *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms—Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 381-2.

<sup>25</sup> F.-L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger, *Die Psalmen 1* (NEchtB; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993), 139.

<sup>26</sup> A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms, Volume I, Psalms 1-72* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972), 346.

<sup>27</sup> There is not universal agreement that the RPss were genuinely monarchic. Erhard Gerstenberger, for example, sees the RPss as being the product of post-exilic messianic expectation and having no grounding in the realities of kingship in Israel or Judah. See his discussion of the setting of Psalm 132 (*Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* [FOTL XV; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 369).

final canonical form.<sup>28</sup> Some were accepted as canonical, others were rejected. So, just why were the RPss – psalms grounded in the ceremonies of the Judean monarchy – retained in a book the final redaction of which took place well into the post-exilic period when kingship was nothing more than a distant memory? Assuming that the editors had an entirely free hand to include and exclude whichever psalms they chose,<sup>29</sup> why did they retain the RPss when there was no king in Israel, no royal line to celebrate? Are they retained merely as historical curiosities? Or could there be deeper processes at work in the thoughts of the editors that reflect changes in how the RPss were read?

It seems that the process of reinterpretation applies as much to the RPss as it does to the psalms of the individual. Just as the original setting of the anonymous 'I' psalms is reinterpreted in the light of the experiences of successive generations of readers, so the RPss are reinterpreted in the light of their historical experience of kingship. A royal psalm would not be read in the same way by a faithful Yahwist living under the reign of David as it would by a faithful Yahwist living under the reign of Manasseh. And, indeed, a psalm-lover living in the exile or the post-exilic period would read the same royal psalm differently from both of the above.

Taking Psalm 2 as an example, and bracketing chronological questions for the sake of argument, the Davidic/Solomonic era reader would be able to treat this psalm the most 'literally' of all readers. He or she would most

---

<sup>28</sup> The 'Psalms of Solomon' and the variety of extra-canonical psalms found in the Qumran scroll 11QP<sup>s</sup> testify to the fact that psalmody was a fairly common currency in the post-exilic period.

<sup>29</sup> This is an issue which merits further discussion: To what extent were the final editors of biblical books entirely free to include and exclude material? Especially with regard to the Psalter, which seems to be formed via the incremental inclusion of multiple smaller psalm collections (e.g. the Songs of Ascents, etc.) into the ever-expanding 'Psalter,' the question is a pertinent one. It could be that the RPss were retained because of editorial conservatism – these were psalms known to be part of the pre-existing smaller groupings, therefore the editors felt it would be inappropriate to exclude them when that collection was added to the Psalter. This is possible of course, however, it does seem that the Psalter's editors exercised a strong degree of editorial freedom in their arrangement of the book and the choice of psalms that they included or excluded. See Wilson's helpful works for further discussion ('Evidence of Editorial Divisions in the Hebrew Psalter', VT XXXIV/3 [1984], 337-52 and 'Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of the Psalms: Pitfalls and Promise', *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* [JSOTSup 159; ed. J. C. McCann; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993], 42-51).

likely have a *reasonably* positive view of kingship as an institution and Israel would have been a (fairly) significant player on the political stage of the day. Therefore, whilst the claims of Yahweh's world rule from Zion would have had a hyperbolic ring to them (vv. 6, 10-12), they would not be seen as *entirely* incongruous. The same could not be said for the psalm-reader in the late monarchic period. Our hypothetical reader living under the rule of Manasseh, for example, would have a very different (probably much more jaundiced) view of kingship and the ideas of universal rule from Judah would sound absolutely absurd as they lived in a country far-removed from Ancient Near East superpower status. How much more so would this be the case for the exilic or post-exilic reader, for whom the history of kingship read as testimony to human failure and now was nothing more than a distant memory?

What would a royal psalm mean to such readers in the post-exilic period? Why would they be retained? The RPss remain in the Psalter because they continually underwent a process of reinterpretation in the light of changing historical circumstances. In particular, the accumulating historical testimony of failure to live up to the ideals of kingship expressed in the RPss, led readers of the Psalter to look for fulfilment of these ideas elsewhere... in a 'new David'. As Jacobson writes, 'The messianic reinterpretation of the psalms developed as a response to the failure of the Davidic monarchy.'<sup>30</sup> John Eaton is surely correct in arguing that there was always an eschatological element to the RPss – even the very best of examples of human kingship fell some way short of the ideals found within the RPss (e.g. the universal rule of Psalm 2 or the supreme justice of Psalm 72).<sup>31</sup> However, it is following the failures of the Davidic house that alternative readings of the RPss would come most prominently to the

---

<sup>30</sup> D. L. Jacobson, 'The Royal Psalms and Jesus Messiah: Preparing to Preach on a Royal Psalm', *WW 5/2* (Spring 1985), 198. I would want to add the word 'primarily' to Jacobson's pithy statement (i.e., 'developed [primarily] as a response to the failure...'), but the point is well made.

<sup>31</sup> Eaton writes regarding Psalm 2, 'Such royal psalms originally had reference to the monarchy of early Israel and functioned in that setting. But from the outset they had a prophetic character: they included vision and oracle, and the purpose of God which they revealed far transcended the experience of the time', (*Psalms* [TBC; London: SPCK, 1967], 33). Longman echoes this thought, 'There were few time periods when Israel or Judah under the Davidides had vassals who would contemplate throwing off their shackles. Even those times, like that of David himself, when Israel did exercise sovereignty over nearby states do not exactly fit the rather grandiose claims implied by this first stanza' ('Messiah', 7).

fore. The weak reality of kingship when compared to the glorious ideals of the RPss, followed by the complete demise of the kingly line, led the people to look for the fulfilment of that ideal in a future king of Israel.<sup>32</sup>

What we see at work is a constant process of reinterpretation of the RPss throughout the monarchic and post-monarchic history of Israel and Judah. It seems fair to say that the later the historical setting of the reader, the more 'eschatological' their reading of that royal psalm. Is it then any wonder that the NT writers reinterpret the RPss in the light of the person and work of Jesus? For centuries such reinterpretation had taken place against a backdrop of changing historical circumstances, the coming of Jesus the Messiah was *the ultimate* change of historical circumstance as far as the apostles were concerned, so it was entirely *inevitable* that the RPss would be reread in the light of Christ by the early (Hebraic) Christian community. Psalmic reinterpretation was a practice with which they were eminently familiar and such rereadings would be entirely consistent with the normal praxis of the day. The RPss had been read with an idea of future fulfilment for many hundreds of years; in Christ that fulfilment arrived quite naturally and inevitably for the NT authors.

#### BEYOND THE PSALMS: PSALMIC REINTERPRETATION AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

So inherent to psalmody in general is an openness to reinterpretation. The questions that we must now ask are: To what extent is the practice of psalmic reinterpretation typical with regard to NT treatments of the OT; and, secondly, how does this christological reinterpretation inform the practice of biblical theology? Basically, can the psalms provide a model for praxis in biblical theology or does their atypical openness to reinterpretation invalidate them as a paradigm?

The answer to this question seems to be, 'Yes and No'! This should not be read as an example of understated, academic fence-sitting – rather, this is an honest assessment of the applicability of psalmody as a model for biblical theology. As discussed above, there is a sense in which the psalms have a peculiar characteristic which opens them up to reinterpretation based around the Christ-event. It is debatable whether other OT texts lend themselves in the same way to this type of christological reinterpretation.

---

<sup>32</sup> 'With the removal of the Davidic monarchy in 586 BC the prophetic aspect of such texts came all the more into prominence. For many centuries, incorporated in Scripture, they served to nourish the messianic hope.' (Eaton, *Psalms*, 33).

Could it be that the psalms' uniqueness in terms of their biblical intertextuality sets them apart and mitigates against their paradigmatic use?

*Ahistoricity* is the unique characteristic of psalmody that lends itself particularly to intertextual reinterpretation.<sup>33</sup> The original context of the psalms is downplayed to allow for reinterpretation in a wide variety of situations and circumstances. It is this interpretative flexibility that allowed for a 'smooth' transition to christological readings of the RPss in the early Christian community. Accordingly, there is a sense in which this unusual flexibility of the Hebrew poetic material sets it apart from the remainder of the OT narrative. Clearly, the Book of Joshua is grounded in a specific historical reality – the conquest of the land; equally, Deuteronomy and the Books of Kings and Isaiah and Haggai and any book of the Law and the Prophets that we would care to mention is also grounded in the self-presentation of a specific historical reality. Therefore, the question must be asked, 'Does the historicity of the rest of the OT abrogate the broader application of christological appropriation and reinterpretation that can be observed regarding the RPss?'

I would suggest that the RPss *are*, indeed, unique in terms of the opportunities that they present for intertextual discussion within the Christian canon. The lack of concrete historical setting aids greatly this type of rereading in a new context. However, although their inherent openness to reinterpretation sets them apart from other OT texts, some helpful parallels may be drawn from the NT use of the psalms and applied to the adoption of other OT texts.

### *The Rule of the Anointed*

One of the central characteristics of the RPss adopted by Luke and/or the apostles in Acts 1–4 is that of the *rule* of the anointed. This is seen in the 'right hand' imagery of Psalms 16 and 110 (see Acts 2:25 and 2:34-35 respectively) and the idea of the 'nations plotting in vain' in Psalm 2 (Acts 4:34-35). In Psalm 16 the psalmist's claim that YHWH is always 'before

---

<sup>33</sup> Of course, ahistoricity is not entirely unique to the Psalter, but is also a characteristic of the Wisdom Literature (i.e. Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) and the Song of Songs. The remaining poetic book of the Writings (Lamentations) places its poetry within a firm historical context, namely, the exile and the covenant community's response to it. The ahistoricity of these books has also led to a certain (lesser) degree of christological rereadings throughout the centuries (e.g. the personification of wisdom in Proverbs 8 has often been interpreted christologically: see R. Van Leeuwen, *The Book of Proverbs: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections* [NIB, vol. 5; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997], 96-9).

him and at his right hand' (v. 8) is to be read as an indication of power and certainty regarding the future because of the psalmist's relationship with YHWH.<sup>34</sup> The 'right hand' imagery becomes even more explicit in Acts 2:34-35 with Peter's adoption of Psalm 110 which speaks explicitly about the sovereign rule of the anointed king at the right hand of YHWH, until all enemies are subdued<sup>35</sup> and this tone is further accentuated in the citation from Psalm 2 (Acts 4:25-26) which celebrates the sovereign rule of YHWH administered via 'his anointed/son/king' whom he has established in Zion. The imagery of divine rule and order via a chosen anointed individual is the clear focus of the RPss adopted by Luke and the apostles<sup>36</sup> and this is, in one sense, typical of the NT's use of the OT. It appears, therefore, that images found in the OT that speak about issues of divine rule via an anointed individual, lend themselves particularly well to the type of christological reinterpretation practised by the NT authors.

### *The Rejection of the Anointed*

Perhaps more subtle in the example passage chosen for this study, but equally apparent in the broader context of christological rereadings of OT texts in the NT, is the idea of the *rejection* of the anointed. In Acts 4:11 we read Luke's account of Peter's defence before the Sanhedrin, and as part of that hearing he adopts Psalm 118:22 to highlight the fact that this Jesus of Nazareth – rejected by the religious rulers of the day – was, in fact, the 'cornerstone' rejected by the builders. The NT authors are keen to explain that, whilst Jesus did not fit the expected mould of messiahship, it was the expectation that was wrong not the Messiah.<sup>37</sup> The first century messianic expectation was of an eschatological king who would fulfil a dynamic function of rule and the exercise of political authority.<sup>38</sup> Jesus did not

---

<sup>34</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 87; Wilson, *NIVAC Psalms Volume I*, 311.

<sup>35</sup> Allen, *Psalms*, 118-20.

<sup>36</sup> 'readers cannot fail to notice Luke's emphasis. This speech's structure is found in Acts 2:22-24, 32-33 and 36, a structure which helps readers to identify Joel's "Lord" of Acts 2:21 with the Jesus "whom you crucified"', (P. Doble, 'The Psalms in Luke-Acts', *The Psalms in the New Testament* [eds S. Moyise and M. J. J. Menken; London: T&T Clark International, 2004], 93-4).

<sup>37</sup> M. J. Selman, 'Messianic Mysteries', *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (eds P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess and G. J. Wenham; Carlisle/GrandRapids: Paternoster/Baker, 1995), 283-5.

<sup>38</sup> This appears to be what led to the 'messianic hiddenness' throughout the early period of Jesus' life and ministry. It was false expectations of the function that the Messiah would fulfil, that led Jesus to avoid all such

present himself in this light but rather adopted the role of 'suffering servant' in his earthly ministry, and the NT writers used many OT texts to highlight that this monochrome messianic expectation erred from the multifaceted prophetic presentation of the Messiah.<sup>39</sup> Luke is keen to show that this Jesus who died on a cross could indeed be the promised 'anointed one' and he adopts Psalm 118 to this end. In fact, it is possible to trace a subtle theological use of Psalm 118 throughout Luke's writings. Prior to the death and resurrection of Christ, Luke highlights that Jesus is the triumphant representative of the people who 'comes in the name of the Lord' (Ps. 118:26, cf. Luke 13:35; 19:38). However, when it becomes clear in the Lukan narrative that Jesus is going to be rejected by Jerusalem, he switches tack to focus on Psalm 118:22 which assures the reader that the rejected one is in reality the vital 'cornerstone'.<sup>40</sup> So we can see that as well as texts that focus on the rule of the anointed, the NT authors also draw upon those OT texts that highlight the rejection of the Messiah.

### *The (Hi)story of the Anointed*

Another interesting and representative example of NT exegesis of the OT can be found in the initially incongruous use of Psalms 69 and 109 in Acts 1:20. At first glance, the apostolic use of verses from these two psalms seems entirely out of place, especially as these texts are not normally treated as kingship poems.<sup>41</sup> It may well simply be the case that the

---

terminology and overtones (e.g. his adoption of the ambiguous 'Son of Man' self-descriptive as opposed to a more obviously messianic descriptive, etc.). See the discussion in Larry Hurtado's article 'Christ', *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds J. B. Green, S. McKnight, I. H. Marshall; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 106-17, especially his discussion of Mark's Gospel (109-112) for a helpful summary.

<sup>39</sup> That this was a particular concern of the NT writers is shown, for example, in the multiplicity of citations drawn from Isaiah's 'Servant Songs' (Isa. 40-55) which portray an image of a representative figure suffering on behalf of the people (see 'Index of Quotations' and 'Index of Allusions and Verbal Parallels', *The Greek New Testament* [UBS 4th ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994], 888 and 897 respectively).

<sup>40</sup> See J. Ross Wagner's helpful article 'Psalm 118 in Luke-Acts: Tracing a Narrative Thread', *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel: Investigations and Proposals* (JSNTSup 148 and SSEJC 5; eds Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 154-78.

<sup>41</sup> It should also be pointed out that the plural form in Psalm 69:25 (MT 69:26, *tirtam*) is changed to a singular possessive in Peter's citation. We should note that (if the citation is drawn from the LXX, as seems to be



anonymous godly individual of the psalms is seen 'by Jesus and the early church as typifying the Messiah',<sup>42</sup> but, on the other hand, there may be a slightly more subtle reading at work here which draws us again to the RPss. Richard Longenecker highlights two basic presuppositions observable in inner-biblical exegesis – 'corporate solidarity' and 'correspondences in history'<sup>43</sup> – which bring our attention back to the figure of the king as Messiah in the OT and the fulfilment of that office in the person of Jesus. The first of these presuppositions draws upon the interaction between representative individuals in the community (e.g. king or priest) and the community itself, where the representative may embody the whole group or the group is seen as a collective of individuals. The latter presupposition indicates that:

early Christians were prepared to trace out relations between God's activity in the past and his actions in the present – that is, between events then and events now; between persons then and persons now. Such correspondences were not viewed as being just analogous in nature, or to be used only by way of illustration. For the early Christians, they were incorporated into history by divine intent and so were to be taken typologically. Their presence in the history of a former day was seen as elucidating and furthering the redemptive message of the present.<sup>44</sup>

This is a prime example of reinterpretation/recontextualization: the early Christians saw the David of Psalms 69 and 109 as a representative figure<sup>45</sup>

---

Luke's habit [Doble, 'Psalms in Luke-Acts', 117]) this is a simple matter of moving from an *auton* to an *autou* and given the scope for reinterpretation of the psalms discussed above this would not be a great hermeneutical leap either conceptually or linguistically.

<sup>42</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1980), 65.

<sup>43</sup> Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 77-8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>45</sup> Again, neither of these psalms would come within Gunkel's category of Royal Psalms, yet there are indications of a possible background in the Davidic court for each composition, thus raising the representative 'corporate solidarity' of the 'David' figure in these poems and making them more amenable to christological reinterpretation. See Eaton, *Kingship*, 51-3, 81 for discussion of the royal milieu to Pss 69 and 109; L. C. Allen, 'David as Exemplar of Spirituality: The Redaction Function of Psalm 19', *Bib* 67/4 (1986), 544-6, for discussion of David as a 'representative figure' in the Psalter; and Doble, 'Psalms in Luke-Acts', 87-90, for discussion of Luke's use of 'the psalmic David' to make his christological point in this passage.

and, therefore, the events that took place in the psalmist's historical reality as 'furthering the redemptive message' of their present day. David's imprecation on his enemies (Ps. 69:25), therefore, can be seen as appropriate explanation of the events surrounding the death of Judas although the two are, *prima facie*, separated by a millennium. Similarly, the prayerful plea that an enemy be removed from his office and replaced by another (Ps. 109:8) was read as divine counsel for the apostles' day and situation despite the separation of time and setting.<sup>46</sup>

The ideas of 'corporate solidarity' and 'correspondence in history' are somewhat strange to the modern mindset, yet these were common interpretative practices in first-century Judaism. As Moyise comments:

we might conclude that there is no logical connection between Psalm 69.25 and finding a replacement for Judas. To us, such exegesis looks 'arbitrary' or even 'gratuitous' and we would not approve of such techniques today. But we should not thereby conclude that it appeared 'arbitrary' or 'gratuitous' to people at the time. Given their experiences and mindset, the connection was probably obvious. In this study, we are interested both in how it might have looked to them and how it appears to us.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Of course the chronological separation between the psalms and the events of the early church may be a great deal less than is suggested by the Davidic superscriptions. Although it is quite likely – given the Chronicler's presentation of David as psalmist, musician and worship coordinator – that at the very least some (if not many) of the canonical psalms were penned by David (see H. N. Wallace, 'What Chronicles Has to Say About Psalms', *The Chronicler as Author: Studies in Text and Texture* [JSOTSup 263; eds M. P. Graham and S. L. McKenzie; Sheffield: SAP, 1999], 289), not all of the Davidic psalms can be taken as tenth-century BCE compositions. The origin, dating and function of the superscriptions is much under debate; however, the content (and to a lesser extent the language) of some of the psalms seems to indicate that they should not be read as having been literally penned by David. So the gap between authorship of the psalm and its adoption into the realities of the early church may be less than is suggested by the superscriptions, but it would have been a considerable gap nonetheless. (See J. D. Nogalski, 'From Psalm to Psalms to Psalter', *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature and the Psalms: Festschrift Marvin E. Tate* [eds H. W. Ballard and W. D. Tucker; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000], 37-54 for a helpful discussion of the formation of the Psalter and the role of the superscriptions.)

<sup>47</sup> S. Moyise, *The Old Testament in the New: An Introduction* (London: Continuum; 2001), 7.

If our desire is to hear and understand the intertextuality of the early Christian community, we must be careful not to impose our norms on their reality. Correspondence of history was a reality for the Christian church at the time of the writing of the NT and – if we stop and think for a moment – it is not vastly removed from contemporary interpretative practice with regard to the Psalter. The majority of today's Christian community will readily read their own circumstances into the emotions of the psalmist without asking about his or her historical setting. The psalms (because of their hermeneutical flexibility) 'speak' to *our* setting although it is vastly different from that of the original poet. Is our contemporary practice so very far removed from the apostolic understanding? We allow the generalities of the Psalter to speak across gaps of time and culture, the apostles allowed the specifics of the Psalter to speak across the chronological and contextual divide, but essentially the same process of reinterpretation is at work.

To conclude this section, it appears that – whilst the psalms are unique in terms of their hermeneutical flexibility – their appropriation by Luke (and/or the apostles) in Acts 1–4 provides us with some guidance as to 'fair usage' of the OT in the NT. It is these principles that should inform our practice of biblical theology, especially with regard to 'christological' readings of the Old Testament.

#### THE OLD TESTAMENT, CHRISTOLOGY AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

One of the most intriguing verses of the Gospel accounts is found at the end of Luke's first volume. The account of two devastated disciples on their way home from Jerusalem to Emmaus, joined by a mysterious stranger who (having initially appeared ignorant of the cause of their pain) teaches them that the climactic events of those days were not random and disappointing, but rather were necessary and foreseen in the pages of their Scriptures. The mysterious stranger then 'beginning from Moses and from all the Prophets, interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things about himself'.<sup>48</sup>

This verse has been a cornerstone of the practice of biblical theology and the Christian interpretation of the OT from the earliest of days.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the idea of christological interpretation of the OT remains a hot

---

<sup>48</sup> Luke 24:27, translation mine.

<sup>49</sup> G. Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past and Present* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 97-9.

topic in the contemporary academy.<sup>50</sup> Just what does it mean to read the OT ‘christologically’? Clearly, the RPss lent themselves to christological rereading in the eyes of the early church, but how do the principles highlighted above relate to contemporary practice of biblical theology? In particular, how are Christian interpreters in the twenty-first century to understand the concept that the OT Scriptures speak about Christ?

Some confusion reigns in relation to Jesus’ statement in Luke 24:27. Partly, this is due to the nuances of translation and the fact that some of the EVV in their chosen rendering of the text may be read to imply that every passage of the OT canon, *without exception*, speaks about Christ.<sup>51</sup> Inevitably this leads to some fanciful christological renderings of passages from the OT.<sup>52</sup> Such lack of clarity with regard to paradigms for Christian readings of the OT lies at the root of the plea of many a student for more explicit methodological clarity in the way in which biblical theology is carried out. When is it reasonable to draw links between OT and NT texts and when is it beyond reasonable association? This is a real plea from the classroom! Students often read the key texts in the area of biblical theology, which they appreciate greatly, yet they are left unsure as to how to apply the model expressed by the author.

Marshall’s helpful analysis of Luke 24:27 helps to put the idea of christological readings in a more helpful context, and one which informs our understanding of how OT and NT relate in the formation of a biblical

---

<sup>50</sup> Note the relatively recent debate between Francis Watson, a key proponent of christological readings of the OT, and Chris Seitz, who advocates a ‘trinitarian’ hermeneutic rather a strictly christological one (C. R. Seitz, ‘Christological Interpretation of Texts and Trinitarian Claims to Truth: An Engagement with Francis Watson’s *Text and Truth*’, *SJT* 52/2 [1999], 209-26; cf. F. Watson, ‘The Old Testament as Christian Scripture: A Response to Professor Seitz’, *SJT* 52/2 [1999], 227-32). One may be excused for thinking that there is not such a great difference between these key players in contemporary biblical theology as may appear to be the case at first sight. Are ‘trinitarian’ and ‘christological’ readings really *at odds* with one another? We shall return to this question below.

<sup>51</sup> The NIV, for example, translates Luke 24:27 as saying ‘he explained to them what was said *in all the Scriptures* concerning himself’. Of course, this translation can be read in a number of ways, but is often read to suggest that the OT Scriptures *in their entirety* somehow speak of Christ.

<sup>52</sup> Some would reply that these are no more fanciful than the apostles’ renderings, yet there were principles *appropriate to the day* that governed the early church’s exegesis of the OT (discussed above); the same should be the case in our day.

theology. He argues that the verb used by Luke to describe the risen Messiah's catechesis (*dierneneuo*, 'to explain or interpret' [BDAG 1977]) implies 'that the speaker chose out those passages which might be regarded as "messianic" and then proceeded to show how they should be understood, so that they could now "speak" to the disciples'.<sup>53</sup> Examining Luke's use of this verb elsewhere, Bock notes that *dierneneuo* implies reference to both texts which are 'directly prophetic' but also to OT texts that are 'typico-prophetic texts [which] reflect patterns that Jesus re-enacts and escalates to show their fulfilment or their eschatological inauguration at a new level'.<sup>54</sup> So this would include, for example, passages which point to Jesus as 'faithful Israel' in contrast with the failings of Israel in the past (e.g. Matthew's presentation of Jesus' faithful response to temptation in the desert contrasted with the failures of Israel in the desert).<sup>55</sup>

Where does this leave the student of biblical theology? I would suggest that our analysis of Luke's use of the Psalms in Acts 1–4 leads us to a basic methodological starting point for discussion of the NT's use of the OT, a starting point which informs our practice of biblical theology. Christological interpretation does not imply that we 'see Christ' in *every detail* of the OT text. We need not waste time seeking the christological significance of the Tabernacle's *tent pegs* in Exodus 25–40, yet there is a christological significance in the *Tabernacle* itself. It speaks of sacrifice and priesthood and access and the presence of God – vital issues of faith continued and transformed by the Christ-event. There is, perhaps, no great christological significance in the named lists of singers found in 1 Chronicles, yet the ideas of worship and holy space are radically renewed by Jesus the Messiah.

What then of methodology? How does this brief study of the use of the Psalms in Acts 1–4, help to inform the student who seeks to *reasonably* trace themes through the whole of the Christian canon? First, we should remind ourselves of the limited scope of this study. The observations drawn out in this article are based in discussion of a limited text in the NT.<sup>56</sup> What is more, the focus has been upon the *psalmic* citations alone

<sup>53</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 897.

<sup>54</sup> D. L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (BECNT 3B; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1918.

<sup>55</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine; Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 198–210.

<sup>56</sup> Acts 1–4 may be a slightly random choice, however, the aim of this essay is to address how the interpretation of the psalms in the NT speaks to our contemporary practice of biblical theology. This passage was chosen, not

within this limited passage. It is entirely possible that different or complementary conclusions may be drawn from the study of OT prophetic texts cited in Acts 1–4 or, indeed, from the study of psalmic texts adopted elsewhere in the NT. However, even with such a limited scope, the conclusions drawn may be helpful in terms of biblical theology praxis.

## CONCLUSION

What conclusions can we draw from this brief study of canonical intertextuality? In the early church's interaction with the Psalms we see Christians reading the OT text as Christian document – reading it christologically. As we saw above, the RPss lend themselves particularly well to this type of reinterpretation, so they are not entirely typical as a paradigm for Christian interpretation of the OT. Having said that, the three general observations about the type of texts being read in this christocentric fashion, can inform our practice in biblical theology. The task of the (Christian) practitioner of biblical theology is to take into account the overwhelming significance of the Christ-event for interpretation whilst, at the same time, seeking to understand the OT revelation on its own terms, as a 'sensible' theological document in its own right. If we believe that the OT reveals the Creator and Covenant God to the community of his people, and that the contemporary church is the continuance of that community, then surely that revelation still 'speaks' on its own terms just as it once 'spoke' on its own terms. At the same time, the NT makes it clear that aspects of our understanding of that revelation are completely and irrevocably altered by the person, life, work, death, resurrection and hermeneutical practice of Jesus the Messiah. So a tension exists for the Christian reader of Old and New Testaments as Christian Scripture – where should we 'see Christ' in the OT and where should we let the voice of the OT speak simply of YHWH, the God whom the Christian community still worships?

Whilst they in no way provide a complete answer or solution to the tensions that we face, perhaps the three principles observed from the apostolic appropriation of the psalms in Acts 1–4 can inform our discussion helpfully. In seeking those passages of the OT where Jesus 'interpreted for them the things about himself' (Luke 24:27), we should

---

because of any inherent structural compulsion, but rather because of the preponderance of psalmic citations within a relatively short passage, and also because the usage of the psalms seen in this passage strikes me as being reasonably representative of citations from the Psalter throughout the NT.

look to the passages that point to his rule, his rejection and his story in the historical development of God's dealings with Israel. Following the example found in Luke's use of the Psalter, we should look to those passages of the OT which speak about YHWH's rule of the universe through a representative individual (be that prophet or king or judge or sage or anonymous follower of YHWH) and we can legitimately read these as being in some way proleptic or typological, pointing the reader towards an ultimate fulfilment in a greater representative individual. Equally, those elements of the OT narrative that direct the reader to a representative individual who suffers rejection on behalf of the community again point the reader towards history's greatest story of rejection. Thirdly, there is an ongoing, organically developing story in the Scriptures of Old and New Testament. The NT writers drew upon the smallest details of that narrative in explication of the climactic events of the story. This was appropriate in their day and according to their literary practice. The contemporary reader should trace the themes of biblical history christologically as well, but in ways appropriate to our day and literary practice. How does the Christ-event relate to the history of YHWH's dealing with the covenant community? Eden, Tabernacle and Temple present notions and realities of divine presence; they do, however, foreshadow a greater reality of divine presence told as part of the history found in Volume 2 (John 1:14).

So what does it mean to read the OT christologically? It does not mean seeing the cross wherever a piece of wood is mentioned in the OT narrative. It does not mean seeing Christ everywhere at the expense of seeing 'God' in the OT. We should look to the passages which can legitimately be interpreted as bearing reference to the Christ – accounts of representative rule, representative suffering and the organically unfolding history of God's relationship with humankind – and read and interpret them in the light of their ultimate expression. (There are *many* such passages.) At the same time, we should let those passages of the OT that speak to us about God do just that... speak to us about God. There is no tension here.

There are no doubt other categories of text in the OT which legitimately draw christological interpretation – a broader study would make that eminently clear. I do not mean to suggest that these are the only ground-rules for christocentric reading of the OT. However, ground-rules there should be and, despite protestations to the contrary, it does not seem unreasonable to draw this guidance from the NT use of the OT.<sup>57</sup> Where

---

<sup>57</sup> In drawing these principles from the New Testament writers' use of the Old, we must be aware that their interpretative techniques were appropriate to

the OT speaks figurally or typologically of the coming Messiah, we must let that voice ring out clearly. However, surely the task of biblical theology is to let our *theocentric* readings and our *christocentric* readings speak as and when each is appropriate. Gordon McConville, citing the work of Francis Watson, comments:

a Christian reading of the Old Testament (which understands it as preparing the way for Jesus) is bound to be distinct from a reading of it in abstraction from this *telos*, and that such a reading must even so have a real connection with ‘what the Old Testament texts “originally” or “actually” meant’. This balancing-act aims both to preserve the unity of the testaments in their witness to Christ and to avoid fantastic Christological interpretations. The crucial factor in maintaining the balance is that the Old Testament should be allowed to shape our understanding of the reality revealed by Christ: ‘If the scope of the Christ-event is the whole of reality, then there is no danger that any of the breadth and depth of the experience reflected in the Old Testament will be lost.’<sup>58</sup>

Any biblical theology must inevitably see the revelation of Christ as central to our process of interpretation, but this does not mean that the Old Testament loses its distinctive flavour. Where the OT text speaks in a way that foreshadows the Christ-event, we must read it in that light. Where the OT (or the NT text, for that matter) teaches us about God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – we should not impose an unnaturally singular focus. Theocentric and christocentric readings are not at odds – they are two sides of the same coin and we should embrace them both in our study of the relationship between the two parts of our dual (yet singular) canon.

Whilst the psalms are not entirely typical of the challenges faced when assessing the NT’s use of the OT, they do inform our discussion and point us to patterns of usage that might be helpful in our practice of biblical theology. Inevitably, when dealing with a two-volume canon, reinterpretation happens. The Lukan/apostolic usage of these psalms reminds us that it is the same song, just a different version.

---

their day, and, in the same way, our practices must be appropriate to our day. However, a conversation may profitably take place between the two.

<sup>58</sup> J. G. McConville, ‘Biblical Theology: Canon and Plain Sense’, *SBET* 19/2 (Autumn 2001), 147.