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“WHENEVER THE PSALTER IS ABANDONED, AN
INCOMPARABLE TREASURE IS LOST”:
BONHOEFFER, THE PSALTER AND PASTORAL IDENTITY

Rhys S. Bezzant

Bonhoeffer saw in the Psalter significant resources for theology, piety and ministry, as well as for training others for these areas. This essay presents Bonhoeffer’s approach to the psalms and what is lost when they are marginalised.

While Jesus Christ himself used Psalm 110 more than any other, making it his favourite psalm, this honour for Bonhoeffer goes to Psalm 119.¹ He wrote to a correspondent in England, asking for a copy of a recent set of meditations on Psalm 119, drafted a significant meditation on its contents himself in the period of 1939–1940, and quoted from it more than from any other portion of Scripture in his later works.² While in England pastoring a German congregation in London, he learnt to value the use of the Psalter in liturgical settings, an essential part of traditional Anglican worship but something not so common in Lutheran churches.³ Perhaps more intriguing than an appreciation of their liturgical usefulness is the fact that Bonhoeffer gravitated towards this particular psalm as a focus for his reflections on Christian life and engagement with society. Bonhoeffer had been repeatedly told during his theological studies that it was the most boring of the psalms. It is certainly the longest with frequent repetition of themes and tropes. It is the intent of this paper to explore not merely the content of the psalm but to sketch an outline of its place in Bonhoeffer’s own pastoral identity. From this vantage point, we can witness something important about the ministry priorities of Bonhoeffer and resources for obedience today.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, trans. D. M. Gracie (Lanham: Cowley Publications, 2000), 87. In Lutheran style, it was a *Losung*, a brief daily selection from the Scriptures prepared by German Pietists, which prompted Bonhoeffer’s claim that this was his favourite psalm and emotionally settled his decision to return from America to Germany in 1939.

² Brian Brock, “Bonhoeffer and the Bible in Christian Ethics: Psalm 119, the Mandates, and Ethics as a ‘Way,’” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18.3 (2005): 7–29, especially 7–8.

³ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, trans. E. Mosbacher, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 434.

The Value of *Rupture* to a Lutheran Pastor

Bonhoeffer was schooled in higher critical method, which taught him to examine biblical texts to work towards understanding their prehistory: the assumption being that the water is purer the closer we get to its source. Perhaps there is something of this mood when we read the section in *The Prayerbook of the Bible* relating to the classification of the psalms.⁴ However, what is most striking in this slender volume published in 1940, and the last of his works to be published in his lifetime, is its pastoral framework. It begins with a discussion of what it means both to teach Christians how to pray and how to learn to pray ourselves, appealing to Jesus's own words in Luke 11:1.⁵ Bonhoeffer goes on to describe the place of the psalms in the worship service, and draws out pastoral themes, for example suffering and guilt, not normally the technical vocabulary for identification of psalm types. Most striking is the sentence which completes Bonhoeffer's thought concerning the cost of losing the Psalter: "With its recovery will come unexpected *power*."⁶ The heart of a pastor speaks here, one who is concerned for daily obedience and for developing resistance to the passing forms of this world, with personal appropriation of the faith. With particular reference to Psalm 119, we see his pastoral concern. He wants us to approach this psalm with "thanksgiving, praise, and petition," and to recognise that God's commands bring grace.⁷

In fact, it is not just that Bonhoeffer speaks as a pastor, but his credentials as a pastor in the *Lutheran tradition* are clear. He cites Luther more often than any other theological interlocutor.⁸ He makes reference to Luther's approach to the psalms when he quotes Luther as saying, with reference to other devotional materials, "Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalter. Anything else tastes too cold and too hard."⁹ More generally, Luther's christological interpretation of the psalms, making of them an exposition

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms," in *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 5, ed. G. B. Kelly, trans. J. H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 162–177.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, "Prayerbook of the Bible," 155.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, "Prayerbook of the Bible," 162. Emphasis mine.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, "Prayerbook of the Bible," 164.

⁸ Philip G. Ziegler, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Theologian of the Word of God," in *Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture*, ed. K. L. Johnson and T. Larsen (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 23.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, "Prayerbook of the Bible," 161.

of the Lord's Prayer, is largely adopted by Bonhoeffer as well.¹⁰ More significantly, however, in his meditation on Psalm 119, he demonstrates deep philosophical resonances with Luther's own worldview, when he highlights God's ability to intervene and make new, even if that appears to create dissonances and breaches with reality as it had been previously experienced. Just as Luther's own theological breakthrough came through reflection on Romans 1, and the discovery that the "righteousness of God" meant not God's rightly settled opposition to evil, but more particularly God's offer to me, a sinner, of a right relationship with him, so Bonhoeffer supports such a voluntarist (over and against an idealist) approach to Christian beginnings:

This is the answer to the question about the law; God's deeds of deliverance, God's commandments, and God's promise. No one understands the law of God who does not know about the deliverance that has happened and the promise of what is to come ... So it is clear that the Gospel and the faith are not timeless ideas, but the action of God with human beings in history. Since it is a way, it cannot remain hidden from the eyes of other people ... Nor do the commandments stand in the center of this psalm, it is rather the One who commands. Not an 'it,' an idea, but a 'you' meets us in the commandments ... We do not learn to know life and guilt from our own experience, but only from God's judgment of humanity and his grace in the cross of Jesus Christ ... I do not treasure God's promise in my understanding but in my heart. It is not to be analysed by my intellect, but to be pondered in my heart ... God's Word is not a collection of eternally valid general principles that we can have at our disposal any time we wish. It is the Word of God that is new every day for us in the endless riches of its interpretation.¹¹

The philosophical idealism of much of German culture and education in Bonhoeffer's own day is here marginalised, for he refuses to smooth out his understanding of the Word of God through appeal to scholastic categories of knowing, but rather asserts strongly the power of the divine promise to break in with a personal encounter. Brock makes the case that appeal to the law in Psalm 119 is a strategy adopted by Bonhoeffer to "flank" idealist ethics which rested in eternal verities and instead to appeal to Scriptural exegesis in their place. Bonhoeffer in his meditation on Psalm 119 intends to "retain the strong emphasis of *Romans* on the

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, "Prayerbook of the Bible," 155–158.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 97, 105, 106, 114–115, 117, 122.

primacy of God's grace" with conscious dependence on Karl Barth.¹² He presents himself as anti-system, as much of the evangelical tradition in the Anglophone realm has also done.¹³ Grace is disruptive. Hearing the Word and obeying its deontological demands is costly. In writing to his brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher, to argue for the value of an inductive approach to the Scriptural witness, Bonhoeffer says:

The entire Bible, then, is the Word in which God allows himself to be found by us. Not a place that is agreeable to us or makes sense to us *a priori*, but instead a place that is strange to us and contrary to our nature. Yet, the very place in which God has decided to meet us. This is how I read the Bible now. I ask of each passage: What is God saying to us here? And I ask God that he would help us hear what he wants to say. So, we no longer look for general, eternal truths, which correspond with our own 'eternal' nature and are, therefore, somehow self-evident to us. Instead, we seek the will of God, who is altogether strange to us, whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, who hides himself from us under the sign of the cross, in which all our ways and thoughts have an end ... And now let me tell you quite personally that since I learned to read the Bible in this way—and that is not so long ago—it has become daily more wonderful to me.¹⁴

It is a commonplace to see Bonhoeffer as an ethicist.¹⁵ Bethge's magisterial biography has the subtitle "Theologian—Christian—Man for his Times." Metaxas's more popular and less satisfying biography, names him as "Pastor—Martyr—Prophet—Spy." Perhaps we need to give due consideration to Bonhoeffer as exegete, whose goal was to bring the law of God, the *torah*, to bear on individual lives and situations in a timely and convicting way.¹⁶ Psalm 119 gives us an important insight into his pastoral commitments.

¹² Brock, "Bonhoeffer and the Bible in Christian Ethics," 23 n. 70, 25.

¹³ See W. Reginald Ward, *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), where he argues that the anti-system way of thinking has been at the heart of evangelical epistemology since the seventeenth century.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 36–37.

¹⁵ My own research in the eighteenth-century Christian leader of colonial America, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), has demonstrated a similar imbalance, where he is seen as philosopher, theologian, perhaps revivalist, but rarely Scriptural expositor.

¹⁶ Patrick D. Miller, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Psalms," *PSB* 15.3 (1994): 274–282. Miller makes the case that Bonhoeffer has often been misread

The Necessity of *Order* and a Reformed Perspective

Another theme from Psalm 119 must also be explored. Alongside Bonhoeffer's joy that God's revelation breaks into our world with its origin *extra nos*, he works hard to suggest that this apocalyptic inbreaking does not mean that God is impetuous, capricious, or unstable. Just as law is intimately connected to God's disruptive works of salvation (at the Passover children ask about the *law* but receive an answer in terms of *deeds* of liberation), so also law is connected to ongoing shaping of and guidance for the Christian life. From the very beginning of his meditative exposition of this psalm, Bonhoeffer highlights the psalmist's vocabulary which identifies the law as a "way" in which believers walk:

Because of the beginning God has made with us, our life with God is a way that will proceed in his law ... The way between this beginning and this end is their walk in the law of the LORD ... There is really only one danger on this way, and that is to want to go behind the beginning, or, what amounts to the same thing, to lose sight of the goal. The moment that happens, the way ceases to be a way of grace and faith. It ceases to be God's own way. So we are addressed as those who are on the way with the psalmist.¹⁷

The language of "way," besides its frequency, represents pictorially a continuous path along which we are led towards our glorious destination. The law of the Lord, so eloquently described and prized in this psalm, has the function not just of commanding individual acts of obedience, but also giving overall form to our discipleship, for God's precepts so hedge our pilgrimage that our path is constrained towards its achievement:

One goal must emerge from the many goals in my life, one single direction from the different directions in which I run: God's statutes ... Heaven, earth, and humanity have their course decreed by these statutes ... The creation and the law are the two great unbreakable statutes of God, which eternally belong together, because the same God has given them (Ps 19).¹⁸

by the contemporary academy for he doesn't adhere to our own preferred hermeneutical methods.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 95–96.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 108.

There is a unity to God's purposes, building on the achievements of Christ's reconciling work, which the law attests, if only our inmost eyes have been opened to see the wonders of God's law: "What appeared to me to be dead is full of life, what was contradictory resolves itself into a higher unity, harsh requirements become gracious commands ... The great wonder in the law of God is the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁹ Through Christology, Bonhoeffer secures deep themes of unity in the Scriptural witness, in which the law has a positive role to promote order. During 1942, in the midst of the chaos of war, he wrote to former students of the *Predigerseminar* in Finkenwalde, and exhorted them to persistent meditation on the Word to promote just such ends:

Daily, quiet reflection on the Word of God as it applies to me (even if only for a few minutes) becomes for me a point of crystallization for everything that gives interior and exterior order to my life. Our previous ordered life has been broken up and dissolved in these present days, and we are in danger of losing our inner sense of order, too, because of the rush of events, the demands of work, doubts, temptations, conflicts, and unrest of all kinds. Meditation can give to our lives a measure of steadiness ... Meditation is a source of peace, of patience, and of joy; it is like a magnet that draws together all the forces in our life that make for order.²⁰

To argue for a positive use of the law, not merely to drive us penitently to Christ but to give ordered shape to our experience of God in the world (the so-called third use of the law), is to promote a set of continuities more at home in the thought of Calvin than Luther. Direction from the Lord is concrete, positive and generous:

God's commandment is God's personal word to me for this present day, for my day-to-day living. Of course, God's commandment is not today this and tomorrow that, since God's law is at one with itself. But it makes all the difference whether I obey God or my principles ... He gives us his will to know; he requires its fulfilment and punishes the disobedient.²¹

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 127. Of course, any deliberation on the nature of Christian unity functioned as implicit critique of the *Führerstaat*, in which Hitler himself embodied the unity of the nation in his own fiat.

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 42–43.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 130–131.

Brock argues that rather than Bonhoeffer seeing the law as an imposition on the creation, in fact the inverse is the case: creation is “thus conceived as a location *within* the Law: God’s redeeming is the context of his creative work.”²² To show such appreciation of the law and to lodge its value in its internal consistency and as a superset for the creation, is to show some distance from the Two Kingdoms Doctrine which had been such a staple of Lutheran social ethics. Bonhoeffer exhibits in this line of thought the characteristics of a Reformed thinker: as the Lutheran pastor he esteemed the ethics of deontology, but Bonhoeffer as the Reformed fellow-traveller makes a case for the ethics of teleology. Miller summarises this argument:

Bonhoeffer seems to have been trying to deal with the negative dimension of the law as it was understood in much of Lutheranism and was drawn to a more covenantal understanding of law and grace or law and gospel, in the manner of Karl Barth. In so doing, he was also drawn to a perception of the law more true to its place in the Old Testament. Law was not for Bonhoeffer a curse and a killer, that which convicts us and shows us our need for redemption. It was itself the fruit of redemption.²³

Furthermore, Bonhoeffer, in showing appreciation of the Old Testament, and more generally in retrieving the Psalter for Christian use, was confirming his reputation as a trouble-maker. Under National Socialism, the Hebrew Scriptures were being demonised, and the publication of this very book had political ramifications.²⁴ Bonhoeffer reflected on the events of the *Kristallnacht* by making a marginal comment in his Bible next to Psalm 74:8–11.²⁵ His patient reflection on the psalms was cultivating an openness to God and to his own active participation in political conspiracy.²⁶ Traditional Lutheran quiescence was giving way to new theological insights and social engagements.

²² Brock, “Bonhoeffer and the Bible in Christian Ethics,” 13.

²³ Miller, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Psalms,” 276–277.

²⁴ Geoffrey B. Kelly, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” in *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 143–144.

²⁵ A touch of pathos: this paper is being written on the seventy-fifth anniversary of that night.

²⁶ Miller, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Psalms,” 281–282.

The Pursuit of *Power* through a Life of Piety

The Psalter for Bonhoeffer was a training tool, both for him personally and in the community life of the seminarians he was forming. Though they lived through this *Notzeit*, which necessitated emergency measures including the creation of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer nonetheless persisted in arguing that resistance to the evils of the Hitler dictatorship should be cultivated not by a life of frenetic activism, but through persevering meditation. In a small piece entitled “Mornings,” an earlier draft of what would become a section in *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer addresses the question of ardour and order:

It is wrong to say that we are being “legalistic” when we are concerned with the ordering of our Christian life and with our faithfulness in requirements of Scripture reading and prayer. Disorder undermines and destroys the faith: any theologian who confuses evangelical freedom with lack of discipline needs to learn that. Whoever wants to carry out properly any fully developed spiritual office, without bringing both self and work to ruin by mere activism, must learn early on the spiritual discipline of the servant of Jesus Christ.²⁷

Similarly, in the meditation on Psalm 119 some years later:

There is no standing still. Every gift we receive, every new understanding, drives us still deeper into the Word of God. We need time for God’s Word. In order to understand the commandments of God correctly we must meditate at length upon his Word. Nothing could be more wrong than that activism or that feeling of contentment that denies the worth of reflection and meditation ... Certainly, God will often require quick action; but he also requires stillness and reflection.²⁸

Personal piety, in these texts expressed by personal Bible reading and prayer, is the basis for a life of engagement with the church and in the world. Teaching his seminarians to pray was at the heart of the Finkenwalde project: Kelly and Nelson point out that “Bonhoeffer was convinced that to form a truly Christian community and to exercise their role as moral leaders of that community, they had to develop a prayerful

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 30–31.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 121.

relationship with God and a willingness to be led by God's Word."²⁹ His reflection on Psalm 119 contains several references to the work of the Holy Spirit, who makes particular to our lives the character of Christ himself, enabling us to forbear whatever "misfortune or misery" we encounter.³⁰ The deterministic might of industrial and technocratic societies could be resisted through the cultivation of virtue and its ethical power.³¹ Indeed, Jim Belcher argues that the secret of Finkenwalde was its construction, on an almost monastic template, of liturgical opposition:

Finkenwalde, then, was not a pietistic detour in his life of resistance but a place where daily the students were learning to die to themselves through meditation, confession, the Lord's Supper and intercessory prayers for others ... They were not retreating from the culture; they were learning to engage the world in a whole new way—a way that would not succumb to the power and influence of Nazism ... Bonhoeffer was convinced that the church succumbed to Hitler because its theology and life did not have the theological and moral resources to stand up to the Nazi ideology, which was a highly ritualized order.³²

Ethics must ultimately be grounded according to Bonhoeffer not in abstract ideals or specific commands but in an encounter with Christ, where in our heart of hearts our humanity is "reconstituted as a unity in him."³³ Rather than assuming that the church and its members must be ordered instrumentally towards the world, Bonhoeffer argues the contrary: to find our place in politics and society, we have to give to the order of creation a subsidiary role to the order of reconciliation in the church. The state, the family, the race—they all must subserve God's purposes for the church, which is the body of Christ. Brock concludes his article on Psalm 119:

The most important theological development which occurred for Bonhoeffer during the years of political upheaval and engagement with

²⁹ Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 230.

³⁰ Kelly and Nelson, *Cost of Moral Leadership*, 64.

³¹ Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 184.

³² Jim Belcher, "The Secret of Finkenwalde: Liturgical Treason," in *Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture*, ed. K. L. Johnson and T. Larsen (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 200–202.

³³ Brock, "Bonhoeffer and the Bible in Christian Ethics," 21.

Scripture, during which the commentary on Psalm 119 and *Ethics* were written, was the decisive shifting of the centre of gravity in Bonhoeffer's ethics from creation to reconciliation. The critical problem which came to shape his mature thinking on ethics was how to place the doctrine of reconciliation in the foreground in such a way that historical and creaturely existence were not totally eclipsed.³⁴

Put in different words, Bonhoeffer is suspicious of the totalising clamour for relevance in the church's approach to theology. Ziegler gives this summary of a speech Bonhoeffer made to a conference of the Confessing Church in Saxony: "Programmatic concern for relevance grants to the world, rather than the Word, the status of *decisive* reality ... and affords the present ... *de facto* status as 'another source' of divine promise and claim."³⁵ Christ alone, and not any self-styled messiah, is the source of power for life and godliness.

Bonhoeffer's reflections on the psalms, in particular Psalm 119, provide a window into his own intellectual formation and strategies for obedience during the German church struggle. He defends the place of vital piety in grounding ministerial formation, just as he requires it for discernment of God's will and ways. The power of godliness also provides evidence of the inbreaking nature of the divine Word. His Christian and ministerial identity were both shaped by and focussed on his exposition of the Word of God. He rebukes our feeble commitment to the Psalter in both personal and liturgical settings. While at various points we may demur from his particular interpretations of individual psalms, we may nonetheless conclude with Leon Morris, former principal of Ridley College in Melbourne: "One who lives in easy circumstances has no business to complain about the martyrs."³⁶

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³⁴ Brock, "Bonhoeffer and the Bible in Christian Ethics," 22.

³⁵ Ziegler, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Theologian of the Word of God," 29.

³⁶ Leon L. Morris, *The Abolition of Religion: A Study in 'Religionless Christianity'* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 89.