

# SOME THOUGHTS ON HERMENEUTICS ARISING FROM THE PSALMS

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## THE MESSIANIC HOPE AND THE PSALMS

We start with a familiar problem. Various Old Testament writers testify to the existence of what has come to be called the messianic hope, the belief that God would raise up in the future an ideal king descended from, or at least patterned on, David, who would establish his eternal kingdom. The term 'Messiah' is commonly used to signify this ruler who is to come. It comes as a surprise to some of us then to read that this term, or rather its Hebrew equivalent, an adjective meaning 'anointed', is not used in the OT for 'the (future) Messiah'. Yet this is a commonplace observation. I cite two examples. 'Out of this hope, but probably not until sometime in the Hellenistic period (after 331 B.C.), Jews came to use *mašiah* (and the Greek equivalent, *christos*) as a designation for a future agent ("messiah") to be sent by God, usually to restore Israel's independence and righteousness'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, it is said that 'all the references [sc. to the anointed of Yahweh] are to the present king or a past king'.<sup>2</sup> Thus in Zechariah 4:14 the unusual phrase two 'sons of oil' refers to contemporary figures. The interpretation of Daniel 9:25f. is obscure;<sup>3</sup> it is a text that in any case is probably fairly late and marginal to the OT as a whole and it is significantly *not* cited as a messianic prophecy in the NT, a fact that is all the more significant when one bears in mind that the early Christians scoured the Old Testament for messianic allusions and would surely not have missed this one if it was really a messianic reference.

Against the background of this scholarly consensus we now observe that the term 'anointed' is used a number of times in the Psalms (Ps. 2:2; 18:50 [17:50 LXX]; 20:6 [19:6 LXX]; 28:8 [27:8 LXX]; 84:9 [83:9 LXX];

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<sup>1</sup> L. W. Hurtado, *DJG*, 107.

<sup>2</sup> F. Hesse, *TDNT* IX, 504.

<sup>3</sup> It is seen as a reference to 'the eschatological Anointed One, the Messiah' by J. N. Oswalt, *NIDOTTE* II, 1123-27. Other evangelical scholars make the same interpretation.

89:38, 51 [88:38, 51 LXX]; 105:15 [104:15 LXX]; 132:10, 17 [131:10, 17 LXX]). We can trace three stages in the history of the interpretation of the texts.

### **1. *The original setting***

With the exception of Ps 105:15 these references are in the singular and their reference would appear to be to David himself or to [one of] his descendants (Ps 18:50), understood as the presently reigning king (see especially Ps 89:8, where God is said to be very angry with his anointed one, an unlikely attitude towards the Messiah). Sometimes the words are those of the king himself, at other times they are spoken about him by somebody else. On the assumption that these Psalms were composed during the monarchy this interpretation makes good sense. The Psalms were saying something that was relevant to their contemporary situation.

### **2. *The compilation of the Psalms***

The time came when Israel no longer had a king; after the exile there was no native king, although foreigners like Herod claimed the title. How then were the Psalms to be read? We do not know the history in detail, but two things happened. The first was the gathering together of the Psalms, probably in stages by way of earlier smaller collections to form the collection that we now have. The second was that the Psalms were read in the light of the new situation. I am indebted to J. L. Mays for the attractive suggestion that, now that there was no longer an actual king, the tendency was to read the Psalms as prophetic of what would be the case when Israel again had a king appointed by the Lord. And once the term 'anointed' was used of this future king, it would be natural to read other psalms, which referred in similar ways to the king but without the use of this term, as also referring to the same figure; hence Psalms such as 3; 72 and 110 would be understood in this context. The result of this was a messianic understanding of the Psalms.<sup>4</sup> This is true of the Hebrew Psalter; it is said to be all the more the case with the LXX version.<sup>5</sup> Hence, and the point is important, the use of the term 'anointed' as a way of referring to the figure that we have come to call 'the Messiah' is in fact found in the Old Testament, despite the scholarly opinions to the contrary that I have cited, and indeed I could quote myself to the same erroneous effect: 'The term "anointed" is not

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 99-107, espec. 100. Cf. idem, *Psalms (Interpretation)*. Louisville: John Knox, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> J. Schaper, *Eschatology in the Greek Psalter* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 138-64.

used in the Old Testament with reference to a future king descended from David'.<sup>6</sup> I now publicly retract that assertion.

Mays, of course, is not alone in this insight and was not the first to voice it. Much the same had already been said, though perhaps not quite as clearly by B. S. Childs:

Indeed, at the time of the final redaction, when the institution of kingship had long since been destroyed, what earthly king would have come to mind other than God's Messiah?

In sum, although the royal psalms arose originally in a peculiar historical setting of ancient Israel which had received its form from a common mythopoeic milieu, they were treasured in the Psalter for a different reason, namely as a witness to the messianic hope which looked for the consummation of God's kingship through his Anointed One.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. *The Psalms as Christian Scripture*

The third stage that followed on from this was of course the Christian recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, with the accompanying understanding of these Psalms as being prophetic of him.

The consequences of this final stage are highly significant.<sup>8</sup> P. Doble has provided a summary of some recent research (published and forthcoming) in which he draws attention to the use of the Psalms by Luke, particularly in his passion narrative.<sup>9</sup> The Psalms are, of course, interpreted messianically. Doble's contention is that they provide the scriptural basis for the assertion that it was written that the Messiah had to suffer and enter into his glory. Moreover, Luke notes that Jesus says that the evidence for this lies in the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms. But it is principally the Psalms that come to notice in this connection. Here is a picture of God's anointed who is God's servant and Son, chosen and elect. Doble thus finds an alternative source to Deutero-Isaiah for Jesus as servant. Furthermore, this figure is one who suffers. Now the recognition of a suffering righteous *figure* in the Psalms, and the application of this

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<sup>6</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 74.

<sup>7</sup> B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 516-17. Childs cites C. Westermann to the same effect.

<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing this I have not seen S. Moyise and M. J. J. Menken (ed.), *The Psalms in the New Testament* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> P. Doble, 'Luke 24.26, 44—Songs of God's Servant: David and his Psalms in Luke-Acts', *JSNT* 28:3 (2006), 267-83.

model to Jesus had already been noted by scholars, especially (but not exclusively) by R. Pesch in his commentary on Mark<sup>10</sup>. But what is now happening is that here we have a recognition of a suffering *Messiah* in the Psalms, which stands alongside the recognition of a suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah. Of course, one can argue for the 'messianic' character of the Servant,<sup>11</sup> but here we have the actual term being used in the Psalms. The righteous sufferer in the Psalms is a messianic figure, and not simply any loyal servant of Yahweh.

### THE THREE STAGES IN INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALMS

What is the broader significance of this discovery? Many of us may have been worried about some aspects of the use made of the Old Testament in the New. It has been difficult to see how some of the texts cited or alluded to can be regarded as prophecies or proofs for what the New Testament authors get out of them. More importantly, it has been difficult to see how the usage would have carried any conviction for a Jewish audience (let alone a Gentile one). If there was no messianic understanding of the crucial passages, how could the Christians have hoped to persuade their partners in dialogue? The missing element has now been supplied. While the original reference in the relevant Old Testament passages was to the reigning monarch (or an immediate successor), by the time the Psalms were collected and effectively canonised (cf. Luke 24:44) the references in them were understood, where appropriate, as messianic.

We can thus distinguish three stages in the history of the Psalms:

1. The original composition in which some Psalms were spoken by or to a historical ruler with reference to the concrete circumstances of their time.
2. The re-interpretation of these Psalms as looking forward to the future hope of an ideal king (a hope that was dependent upon the clear prophecies in Isaiah and elsewhere of such a ruler).
3. The recognition of these Psalms as finding fulfilment in Jesus the Christ. Here the process of interpretation was a dialectic one. The Psalms were used to confirm the Christian understanding of Jesus as the Christ since he alone appeared to fulfil them, but at the same

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<sup>10</sup> R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), II, 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> In Isaiah 42:1 God puts his Spirit on the Servant, but the actual term 'anointed' is not used.

time this fulfilment dictated that the Psalms were to be understood Christological.

The great merit of this understanding of the process of composition and interpretation is that it provides a better basis for the Christian application of the Psalms to Jesus by showing that the messianic understanding was already developing in Judaism, and also by establishing a proper, biblical basis for the use of the term 'anointed' to refer to the future ruler and for the recognition that the Messiah is a suffering figure.<sup>12</sup>

The key factor here is the positing of the second stage. There were two elements in the situation. First, there was the gathering together of the Psalms into a collection with the result that different psalms can be read in the light of one another. Second, there was the influence of the new situation in which the process took place and that led to a new understanding of them.

As a result of these two factors, then, the Psalms could be understood in new ways. This could simply be a new interpretation of existing material that was susceptible of more than one interpretation or application. But sometimes as part of this process of reinterpretation the Psalms could be edited and rewritten over time, in order to adapt them to later situations.

We can see examples of this happening in various places outside the Book of Psalms:

1. One is the scriptural exegesis of the Qumran sect where there is undeniable evidence of the rewriting of texts as they are quoted in order to bring out what the interpreter considered to be the meaning or application of the texts.<sup>13</sup>
2. A second is the usage of the New Testament itself where Paul can quote Scripture in a paraphrastic form that brings out the meaning that he sees in it more clearly. See, for example, 2 Corinthians 6:18; Ephesians 4:8.
3. In the patristic period scribes were capable of re-writing the Psalms in particular in the light of their own understanding. The best-known example is the expansion of the text of Psalm 96:10 to give 'The Lord

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<sup>12</sup> This raises the question whether Paul's statement that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3) reflects this reading of the Psalms.

<sup>13</sup> E. E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), 141.

reigned from the tree', an addition found in Justin, Dial. 73 and Apol. 1:41 and the Psalterium Graeco-Latinum Veronense (6th century).

We should not, then, be surprised if the early compilers of the Psalms themselves did similar things. So there can be references to the temple, that were not there in the time of David; to the rebuilding of Jerusalem; to collective needs as well as those of the king.

Here is a summary description of a book that has recently been published but which I have not seen entitled *Collective Reinterpretation in the Psalms* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006):

[The author] reevaluates the extent and nature of the collective passages in the Psalter. Many of the complaint psalms written by an individual were re-read at a later stage from a national point of view. In the altered religious, political and social circumstances, the earlier texts were reworked and re-interpreted so that they would comply more closely with the prevailing conditions. This collectivizing tendency probably began during the exile and continued until the final redaction of the Psalter (about 200–180 BCE). Most of the ancient contributors are unknown to us, but the Hasideans at least may have played an important role in this process at its final stage, since there are some obvious passages where the Hasideans seem to represent the people of Israel exclusively.<sup>14</sup>

From a conservative stance H. L. Ellison identified the following examples in the Psalms:

1. The closing benedictions at the end of each of the sections (Pss 41:13; 72:18-19 [cf. editorial note in v. 20!]; 89:52; 106:48) are part of the editing to indicate the five books of the Psalms.
2. Various Psalms have additions to them, notably Pss 51:18-19; 59:5b, 8b (and perhaps 11a); 63:11; 131:3; 138:2.
3. It is generally agreed that Ps 27 is a combination of two originally separate Psalms (Ps 27:1-6, 7-14); similarly with Psalm 31:1-8, 9-24; and that Psalms 42 and 43 were originally one Psalm.

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<sup>14</sup> Publisher's blurb in *Mohr Kurier 2006/1* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 10. This hypothesis is interesting in that it stands in contrast to the theory that psalms that were originally collective were understood and adapted to serve as individual expressions of piety in the course of canonisation and afterwards.

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4. Perhaps the non-mention of the king in Ps 135:19-20 (where one might have expected a reference) indicates an omission made at a time when there was no longer a monarchy.<sup>15</sup>

All of this makes us more aware of the way in which the composition of Scripture was a lengthy process which involved not merely the original authors but the fresh interpretation and editing and compiling that went on over a long period of time. It makes clear to us the way in which Scripture might have different meanings or applications at different times.

What now was the rationale for the specific process of messianic interpretation?

It could perhaps be said that the kind of things said of any historical king in any of the Psalms were sufficiently true and general to be applied to any future king who was appointed and upheld by God. Hence the move from the particular to the ideal rested upon the fact that what we are given in a particularised form is the sort of promise that God would make to any king of his appointing.

Consider Psalm 2, which is particularly significant because it comes right at the beginning of the book of Psalms and establishes the parameters for interpretation of what follows.

1. It can be understood originally of a rebellion by some subject people against Israel, its king and its God. Such rebellion is futile because God rebukes them. He has installed his king in Jerusalem, the place of his choice. He made a promise to the king, perhaps conveyed by a prophet, but here reported in words attributed to the king: he tells how God has established a paternal relationship with him; he has only to ask and God will enable him to subdue other nations. Therefore he (or a spokesperson) can turn to the rebellious rulers and tell them of the dire consequences of continued rebellion; better to make their peace with the Lord and his son, and take refuge in him rather than to be exposed to his wrath.

2. At the compilation stage there is no longer a king in office, but the Psalm in effect promises that God will install a king and reverse the present situation where Israel is overcome by its enemies. It becomes a message of ultimate hope for the people. It is also a warning to the enemies that their rebellion against the God of Israel will be brought to an end.

How is this justified? A possible line to take is that the Psalm describes what was originally promised to David and to Solomon. 2 Samuel 7 carries the promise that God will provide a successor for David with whom he

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<sup>15</sup> H. L. Ellison, *The Psalms* (London: Scripture Union, 1968), *passim*. Other examples include the apparent splitting of the original Psalm 9 (so LXX and Vulgate) into two (Psalms 9 and 10 in MT) and some corruption of what appears to have been its original acrostic form.

will have a father-son relationship and that the kingdom will endure for ever (cf. Ps 18:50). We have to bear in mind the hyperbolic nature of such language: 'O king, live for ever' (1 Kings 1:31; Neh 2:3; Dan 2:4, et al.) is a rhetorical form of 'Long live the king'. Nevertheless, it is fair to assume that a kingdom that will endure for ever is destined to outlive a number of monarchs.<sup>16</sup> Hence the promise made to David regarding Solomon can be fairly understood as extending to his successors, always provided that they obey God. Psalm 89, recording a vision referring to David and his successors, makes the point clear.

It is, therefore, fair to hope that despite the absence of a king for the time being, God will nevertheless be faithful to his people, and hence the prayers of the people at the end of Psalm 89 are justified: God will arise and have mercy on Zion. Moreover, the language used by the prophets will encourage the recognition that only an ideal king can achieve this purpose. Hence the canonical understanding of the Psalms is justified. David becomes a type for a greater antitype.

3. Then at the final stage we have a specific application to Jesus which leads to some fresh advances in interpretation. The most significant of these is probably the way in which the Father/Son relationship is now to be understood in a different way in the light of the actuality of a Son who enjoys an intimate relationship with the Father that for want of a better word we must call ontological. The 'He said to me' of the Psalm is literally fulfilled or instantiated in the voice that comes to Jesus at his baptism. We can see how the language could be said to be open to this understanding, although it was not the right interpretation at the earlier stages. It also becomes clear that the description of wrath and judgment refers to the final act of divine judgment which is not to be taken literally of warfare.

Further, the reference to actual nations and their rulers can be understood as one instantiation of the rebellion against God on a spiritual level by any and all who reject his rule over them, including ordinary human beings in their secret thoughts and personal actions, as well as nations or other corporate groups actively fighting against the people of God and persecuting them.

A possible weakness in the case for this reinterpretation is that there is little or no unambiguous evidence of alterations in the text to bring about

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<sup>16</sup> The language may originally be simply oriental court rhetoric, but its exaggerated assertions if taken literally point to beyond any earthly king in the small town of Jerusalem in a petty kingdom.



this specific desired interpretation.<sup>17</sup> Rather, it is based upon the potential of the text for such an interpretation, and also upon the fact that evidence for the shift can be seen in the way in which the term 'anointed' became a term for the expected future deliverer and king in Intertestamental Judaism.<sup>18</sup> In other words, this is how the Psalms were read by Jews at the time. I am therefore not unduly worried by the objection.

## THE IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERPRETATION

The significance of all this is threefold.

### *1. The Christian understanding of the Psalms*

As already noted, this particular example is of significance in itself because it enables us to understand more clearly what was going on when the early church saw Jesus in the Psalms. A messianic understanding of the Psalms was already in place, and so the early church was justified in drawing out the details more fully in the light of Jesus himself, and was also able to debate with the Jews and carry out apologetic work on the agreed basis that the passages spoke about the Messiah. Both the term 'Messiah' and the concept of the Messiah were drawn from the Psalms.

### *2. The Christian understanding of the Old Testament*

We have a pattern for understanding other parts of the Old Testament as Scripture, in that looking for a distinction between the meaning and significance at different points in time is a valid approach.

A conspicuous example of this is the laws in the Pentateuch. These were literally binding upon the people of Israel at the time of canonisation; the precise history of what went on before need not concern us here and lies outside the area on which I can dare to offer opinions.

But by the time of the early church, or rather in consequence of the experience of the early church, these laws are read in a different way. At least some of the laws no longer lay down what the people of God ought

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<sup>17</sup> N. Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 99.

<sup>18</sup> Oswalt states that 'even during intertestamental times rabbis were already understanding the unqualified references in the Ps to find their ultimate significance in this eschatological figure' (*NIDOTTE* II, 1126). Since 'no messianic sayings are recorded of Tannaitic scholars who died before A.D. 70' (M. de Jonge, IV, 786) the reference to rabbis must be anachronistic, and the writer is thinking of written apocryphal and pseudepigraphical sources from this period where there are messianic references (Psalms of Solomon).

to do. Rather we now have an authoritative record of what the Israelites were once required to do. Before Christ Leviticus was understood as a set of laws to be applied literally in the offerings of sacrifices, the observance of festivals, and numerous other specific laws for community life.

But with the coming of Jesus Christians came to realise that they were no longer required to carry out the sacrifices on the twofold ground that they could not take away sin and that sin had been taken away once and for all by the death of Christ. If Leviticus remains as part of Scripture, what are we to do with it?

The problem was not a simple one because Leviticus is a mixture of laws and teachings, some of which were recognised as still valid and authoritative for believers. Hence the early Christians must have had the problem of deciding what to do with them and how to discriminate.<sup>19</sup>

We may note in passing the contemporaneous non-Christian Jewish attitude. These laws were in force in the time of Jesus, and the current form of interpretation lay in extending their scope by asking how they were to be applied in detail. A tradition of how to obey them gradually developed. But then came AD 70 after which the Jews were in a similar position to the Christians. Whereas the Christians could not fulfil Leviticus literally because they believed that material sacrifices had been brought to an end by the sacrificial death of Christ, the Jews were unable to fulfil Leviticus literally because the temple had been destroyed and it was not humanly possible to rebuild it. The solution of having a new temple on a different site was not considered because the orthodox belief was that the temple could only be in Jerusalem.<sup>20</sup> What did happen was the exhaustive activity of the Rabbis in exploring every detail of the ritual and elaborating upon it, providing instructions for a non-existent cult. Instead of offering sacrifice the Jews read and interpreted the Scriptures that lay down how it should be done.

### ***3. The Christian understanding of the Bible***

The third consequence is that our experience with the Old Testament may help us to ask questions about how we read and interpret and use Scripture in the period after the canonisation of the New Testament.

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<sup>19</sup> See I. H. Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker/Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 56-63.

<sup>20</sup> The example of the Jews in Egypt who built their own temple at Elephantine was a non-starter.

MEDIAEVAL INTERPRETATION AND THE TASK OF INTERPRETATION  
TODAY

One specific clue to help us may lie in the exegesis of the Middle Ages. This is summed up in the famous quatrain of Nicholas of Lyra which distinguished the four senses of Scripture and their uses:

Littera gesta docet,  
Quid credas allegoria,  
Moralis quid agas,  
Quo tendas anagogia.<sup>21</sup>

Roughly translated, the literal sense teaches what happened, the allegorical what you are to believe, the moral how you are to live, and the anagogical where you are going.

A helpful example is given by C. S. Rodd who summarises a passage from Dante's *Divine Comedy* which shows how this would apply to Psalm 114 which describes Israel's exodus from Egypt:

If we regard *the letter alone*, what is set before us is the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt in the days of Moses;  
if the *allegory*, our redemption wrought by Christ;  
if the *moral* sense, we are shown the conversion of the soul from the grief and wretchedness of sin to the state of grace;  
if the *anagogical*, we are shown the departure of the holy soul from the thralldom of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory.

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<sup>21</sup> For this frequently cited 'jingle' (as he dubs it) see, for example, F. F. Bruce, 'The History of New Testament Study', in I. H. Marshall (ed.), *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979), 28.

Although it has been ascribed to Nicholas of Lyra, and he certainly referred to the four types of sense, he made a clear distinction between the literal and the other three senses; the latter can be grouped together as aspects of the mystical sense: the allegorical (*si res significate per voces referantur ad significandum ea quae sunt in nova lege credenda*); the moral (*si referantur ad significandum ea quae per nos sunt agenda*); the anagogical (*si referantur ad significandum ea quae sunt speranda in beatitudine*) (Migne, PL 113:28, cited by A. S. Wood, 'Nicolas of Lyra', EQ 33 [1961], 196-206 [202]). His major work was a commentary on the literal sense of the whole Bible which is profoundly well-informed and sensible. See C. Patton, 'Selections from Nicholas of Lyra's *Commentary on Exodus*', in S. E. Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 114-28. .

Rodd's own comment on this deserves quotation:

We flinch from such interpretations, and rightly eschew any allegorizing which reads into the Bible meanings we ourselves choose. Yet it may be that a too vigorous determination to discover only what the original writer intended will impoverish our reading of the Scriptures. We should expect God to reveal Himself in similar ways in both testaments, thus creating correspondences between them, if it is indeed the same God who acts in both. Moreover, words which were not intended as allegory, as *Pilgrim's Progress* was, may, none the less, contain within them the figures of a real truth which their authors would not disown. Dorothy Sayers has suggested that this happened in one of her own novels. Thus there is a certain appropriateness in the singing of this psalm on Easter Day, and its use in the last offices for the dying and in the burial service within the tradition of the Western Church since the sixth century.<sup>22</sup>

The Psalm in question is the one about Israel coming out of Egypt to become God's people and the way in which the world of nature responded, the sea fleeing away and the mountains skipping like rams; the earth is called on to tremble at the presence of the God of Jacob who turns rocks into pools of water. Thus the literal sense is in fact expressed in highly metaphorical terms as the significance of Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from Egypt to be his people is seen in the worship and rejoicing of creation. The allegorical sense is then taken to be the redemption brought about by Christ, presumably understood as elsewhere in Scripture as a new exodus. The moral sense is a bit of a stretch, but it would seem to be an allegory of the conversion of a person to become one of God's people, an event as significant and fearful and glorious as the exodus or the Christ-event itself. Finally, the Psalm is metaphorical of the departure of the human soul from the Egypt of bondage in this earthly life to the freedom of the world to come.

## WHAT IS GOING ON IN THIS KIND OF INTERPRETATION?

### *1. The literal sense*

It seems clear enough that the literal sense is the intended sense of the passage, and I find it pretty well impossible to believe that the actual writer was thinking of anything else than this. If so, what is the 'message' of the

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<sup>22</sup> C. S. Rodd, *Psalms 73-150* (London: Epworth Press, 1964), 79. He is picking up on A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 680. The reference is to Dante, *Purg.* c. ii. 46.

Psalm in this original context? Perhaps: here is an event that by worldly standards was fairly insignificant, the expulsion of a minor ethnic group from one of the mighty empires of the ancient world. True, it was accompanied by some remarkable events, as the sea rolled back to let the Israelites walk over, and water appeared from dry rocks in the barren desert to refresh them, signs of God's gracious care. These things encourage the readers to see in the story the establishment of themselves as the people of God whom he delivered from earthly bondage so that God might reign over them and live among them. That is what crossing the Red Sea really means. Hence God is in our midst, and he is mysteriously powerful, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*! Thus what appears to be a historical description turns out to have an ongoing relevance for Israel.

## 2. *The allegorical sense*

But the language and concepts of that exodus event are taken up in the New Testament and used to express the significance of what God has done in Christ. Here is a fresh act of deliverance, this time from bondage to sin and judgment, the creation of a way into a new community where God is present to provide for his people's needs. In a curious way the passing through the waters as on dry land becomes an image of baptism, since perhaps the people are thought of as passing through a channel cut through waters piled up on either side of them and threatening death. The thought is that God repeats what he has done at the Red Sea, and with due allowance for the difference in character of the events, the essential similarity can be seen so that it is permissible to describe the Christ-event as a second exodus.

This immediately raises the question whether we can also regard the exodus as a prior Christ-event. It is certainly a prior act of redemption by the grace and power of God, but there is, to be sure, nothing corresponding to the sacrificial death of Jesus in the actual redemption, unless you include the slaughter of the Passover lambs and extend the event to include the whole of the wilderness experience with the provision of the tabernacle and the establishment of the sacrificial system.

What we do have is the provision of language that helps us to see the Christ-event in a different light. Just as the Psalm itself invokes the metaphor of the natural elements fleeing and dancing, so the New Testament uses the metaphor of deliverance from Egypt to express the significance of the Christ-event, a metaphor that might have been especially apt in helping Jews to appreciate the gospel: what we know God did in the past for us as a people, he has now repeated and surpassed in this new saving action. Thus the use of the language is justified by the fact that it is the

same God acting in a new way that is nevertheless the same kind of way to save.

But what actually is going on when we do this kind of interpretation? The mediaevals spoke of it as allegorising the text, but might it be better to see it as the concrete application of broader principles to particular situations?

### *3. The moral sense*

The application to the individual convert is not so clear. Perhaps we might appeal to 1 Corinthians 10 where the experiences of the Israelites in the wilderness wanderings are seen as ante-typifying those of believers who share in baptism and the Lord's Supper and are in danger of succumbing to the same temptations. It would then be justifiable to see the deliverance of the individual from slavery to sin and the coming of the triune God to be in him/her as corresponding to the deliverance in the Psalm. Again, what does the Psalm mean or how does it function in this context? Is it again to emphasise the wonder of this cosmic event in which God himself comes to dwell amongst us?

### *4. The anagogical sense*

Finally, the anagogical sense sees the Psalm as picturing the departure of the soul from bondage in this material, corruptible world to enter into the freedom of the new world with God. Note that both the Red Sea and the Jordan are mentioned, and the Christian tradition has tended to think of death as the crossing of Jordan rather than the Red Sea. I wrack my memory as to whether in my childhood somebody tried to teach us that the picture of the Christian life is not Red Sea = conversion and wilderness = this life as a whole and Jordan = entry into heaven, but rather Red Sea = conversion and wilderness = the period before you enter fully into all that God plans for us in the Christian life and Jordan = the second blessing or baptism of the Spirit or revival or whatever it is that we pass through in order to enter the Canaan of perfect life here on earth; some of you may have been exposed to a similar path from Romans 5 and 6 through the wilderness in Romans 7 into the peace of Romans 8. Certainly the imagery of Jordan as the boundary between this world and the next is firmly fixed in Christian symbolism, but I am not sure how the Psalm functions here, unless it is to assure us that, as God has delivered us in the past, so at the end he will act in the same way with final deliverance. But I suspect that I learn this more from the New Testament than from this Psalm.

If we follow that sort of exposition, then the mediaeval scheme tells us:

the literal is the original historical story

the allegorical is the doctrine of Christ

the moral (sometimes called 'tropological') is application to the individual, here soteriological rather than moral

and the anagogical is the understanding of death and the life to come.

Now it may be difficult to see all this as coming out of the Psalm. It is certainly not generated out of the Psalm by itself, but is rather a set of ways in which we can see that what happened in the Psalm is analogous or typical of different events described in Christian doctrine, because the same God is at work throughout, and therefore the language of the Psalm can be used to express these other events and experiences. But it is difficult to see anything new coming out of the Psalm that we could not get out of the New Testament alone, and I wonder if the function is more what might be called 'poetic', in that it provides fresh language and symbolism and metaphor to express the Christian experiences. It adds colour to the description, and that is a good thing, but does it add content?

So what does the Psalm 'do'? How is it meant to function? Does it tell the readers something? Is it addressed to God? Is it addressed to the earth or to the nations?

Certainly it takes the events of salvation and makes them cosmic in their significance. 'Here is the Exodus event, not as a familiar item in Israel's creed but as an astounding event: as startling as a clap of thunder, as shattering as an earthquake'.<sup>23</sup> What is the function of the last two verses? Although addressed to the earth is it actually a call to the nations to acknowledge the greatness of our God (and does it say something about our dignity and identity as his people)? But does the Psalm not also carry the message 'what God did then he can do now in refreshing his people'?<sup>24</sup> Yes, for the last verse uses a participle to declare how God's mighty acts continue.<sup>25</sup> 'The Psalm has a clearly prophetic message',<sup>26</sup> and is capable of repeated fulfilment. Thus the Psalm invites readers to continue to see God's hand at work in their midst.

#### MEANING AND APPLICATION?

With all this we may be able now to see that perhaps the mediaeval pattern was not so much a set of aspects of meaning but rather of application. But the application rests on principles and it is a case of seeing an

<sup>23</sup> F. D. Kidner, *Psalms 73 – 150* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 403.

<sup>24</sup> Ellison, *Psalms*, 96.

<sup>25</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 682.

<sup>26</sup> W. A. VanGemeren, 'Psalms', in *EBC V*, 718.

appropriateness in this language for future events which were not in the original writer's mind. Were they in the Holy Spirit's mind?

But you will have noticed that when I attempted to explain them and see whether they were justified, what I did was to go back to the New Testament and see whether it supported them. We saw that the New Testament does have the understanding of the Christ-event as a new exodus; by a bit of a stretch the baptism of the individual convert could be seen as an individualisation of this event, and maybe in this way we might also justify seeing the final transition to the heavenly world.

All this reminds me of Charles Cranfield's explanation of dying to sin and rising to new life in Romans 6 as having four senses or moments:

1. Christians die to sin and are raised up in a juridical sense in God's sight in the historical death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection.
2. They die to sin and are raised in a baptismal sense in their baptism (and for Cranfield as an evangelical and also a paedobaptist this was not to be separated from the individual's own personal faith).
3. They are called to die to sin and rise to newness of life daily and hourly in a moral sense.
4. They will die to sin and be raised up to resurrection life finally and irreversibly at their actual death in an eschatological sense.<sup>27</sup>

The similarity between this and the mediaeval pattern is immediately obvious; the latter must surely have been present in Cranfield's unconscious mind. In this case we might hesitate to use the term 'literal' for the first moment, since it is rather spiritually true of those who are going to believe. But it does refer literally to what has happened historically, and perhaps that very term 'historical' might be more apt.

Here, then, we have what I would regard as a valid example of the mediaeval approach to a New Testament concept, and one that is exceedingly fruitful in bringing out its full sense. Cranfield believed that Paul moved to and fro between some of these different senses of dying and rising with Christ in the course of his exposition, and thus this analytical grid was fruitful in understanding better the passage as a whole. The difference, however, may be that Cranfield obviously believed that these various senses were all present to the mind of Paul: they are aspects or

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<sup>27</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), I, 299-300.



## THOUGHTS ON HERMENEUTICS FROM THE PSALMS

facets of a phenomenon which cannot be tied down to one moment in time (say water baptism).

The mediaeval approach has been defended by David Steinmetz in a short but significant essay.<sup>28</sup> He contrasts it with the historical-critical approach which he identifies as the search for the one meaning intended by the original human author. We may supplement his comment by pointing out that the failure of the historical-critical method was that it was not interested in application; sometimes one gets the impression that if it has explained a text in the sense of showing how it came into being (e.g. on the basis of particular sources) then it has accomplished its job; the question of truth and applicability is side-stepped so that in theory anybody, believer or unbeliever, can share in the investigation.

For the mediaevalists, however, the meaning is not restricted to what the original author intended or thought that he had said, but there can be further implicit meaning that becomes obvious only to later readers. But this does not open the flood gates so that anything goes. Steinmetz sees rather a field of possible meanings outside of which lies eisegesis. He then illustrates this from the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16) where different interpreters took it in different ways:

1. As a picture of the lifespan of an individual, to encourage people to come to Christ late in life.
2. As a picture of salvation-history to show how God welcomed the Gentiles at the last moment and undercut any advantage the Jews who came before them might have had.
3. As a picture of infants who die after only a brief period of service to God but are still rewarded like everybody else.
4. As a refutation of the doctrine of proportionality (our reward is proportionate to the work we have done for God).

All four, says Steinmetz, emphasise the generosity of God and thus 'all fall within the field of possible meanings created by the story itself'. Thus meaning involves the listeners and not just the author. The Bible contains both text and spirit, and we must recognise the existence of both.

I can see what he is getting at, but is it expressed the best possible way? To pick up what I said a moment ago: Is this not another way of putting the situation that a text has one meaning but can have several applications,

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<sup>28</sup> D. C. Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', in Fowl, *Interpretation*, 26-38 (originally in *Theology Today* 37 [1980], 27-38).

depending on the different situations that arise and the different readers? The applications are governed by the meaning, which creates what Steinmetz calls the 'field of possible meanings'.

Two, or rather three, points may be made by way of clarification. First, it is arguable that the literal meaning shows how the text instantiates a particular divine principle or action. The various other senses or applications are then fresh examples of the same divine principle or action. Thus the Christ-event is the supreme occasion of the powerful, redemptive love of God seen in the exodus event. So the further meanings or applications or whatever we call them are not so much further aspects of meaning of the text or what is described in the text, but rather of the theological truths that come to particular expression in the text.

Second, when Steinmetz talks of limiting the field of possible meanings, the parameters for interpretation of the Old Testament are in fact set by the New Testament with its revelation in and through the whole of the Christ-event, which for me includes both the life, deeds, teaching, death, resurrection and exaltation of Christ and also the continuing working and revelation of God in the coming of the Spirit, the creation of the church and the inscripturation of the teaching of the apostles and the other inspired writers of Scripture.

Hence I draw the important point that that the applications or fresh meanings arise out of a dialectic between the original text and early Christian insight and experience, as reflected in the New Testament, that is carried on by later readers, rather than being simply between Scripture and its subsequent readers (as would appear to be the case in reader-response criticism where no limits seem to be placed on what the readers may do with the text).

This in fact leads to a third point, for which I am indebted to N. Kiuchi. In his discussion of the permanent value of Leviticus, he makes the point that the laws contained in it represent the expression of latent purposes and ideals such as the principle of sacrifice, the moral distinction between clean and unclean, and the commandment of neighbourly love, so that the New Testament does not so much moralise and spiritualise what was on a lower level as rather bring out in a deeper way what lay behind the laws. So, for example, 'when Jesus averred that cleanness and uncleanness are matters of the heart (Mk 7:20-23), contrary to the commonly held view, it was not a moralization of a "cultic" idea. Rather, Jesus merely pointed out the original meaning of cleanness and uncleanness'. Thus the teaching in Leviticus remains relevant to believers as it points to these important matters.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> N. Kiuchi, 'Leviticus, Book of', in *DOTP*, 522-32 (531).

CONCLUSION

How does all this affect our interpretation of Scripture?

1. For me it strengthens the case for the classic distinction between meaning and significance or between meaning and fresh application, and it reinforces the duty of the interpreter to attend to both parts of the process, both the research on the original meaning that creates the control over applications and the determination of valid applications, specifically the application to ourselves and the audience whom we face as interpreters and preachers. There is clearly much to be learned from past applications as we consider their validity in the light of the text and discriminate between the valid and the invalid, but also as we use them as clues to help us forward in our own task of interpretation for today.

2. We have seen something of a rationale for this process within the canon itself as we have seen the development of the Old Testament canon with its implications for the understanding of the books in it and then the incorporation of the Old Testament as the Scriptures of Christian believers, both at the level of use in the early church as recorded in the New Testament and then as part of the twofold canon that commended itself to the developing church culminating in the general recognition of it in the fourth century.

3. The study of Scripture thus contains two elements. One is the better understanding of the original meaning and the meaning at different stages in the canonical process. The other is the way in which Scripture can speak anew to us through fresh application. When John Robinson made his famous comment that 'the Lord hath yet more truth and light to break forth from his holy Word', he was presumably thinking of this latter activity rather than the former.