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*Chapter Six*

## **The Psalter and Meditation**

On the Genre of the Book of Psalms

Can we still pray the Psalms, sing them at the daily Office? Modern study of the Psalms makes this a two-edged question. Reform of the Divine Office has sharpened, not blunted it. How would it sound if we turned the question around?

For example: Christian life is not centered on the Torah, and yet the Torah is the theme of Psalm 1. What relationship do we have to the ancient Jewish rituals of kingship? Psalm 2 comes out of them. When should we pray Psalms 3 or 4, if they were once part of the judicial rituals in the Jerusalem Temple? We do not offer daily morning sacrifice by slaughtering sheep. So when can we pray Psalm 5? We could go on this way. The *Sitz im Leben* of most of the psalms is a world in which we no longer live, that no longer even exists. The very study of genres that has contributed so much to our understanding of the psalms makes them strangers to us. It has shown the cultic origins of many psalms. But it was a different cult, not ours.

On the other hand, the psalms are still prayed by many people today. A lot of people can express themselves to God *better* through the psalms than through other prayers or even their own words. Liturgical fashions wither in a few years, yet monastic prayer in choir has endured. Is it possible that scholarly reflection has overlooked something about the psalms? maybe even the most important thing? This is the question that inspired this essay.

My main point is this: we are really not talking about *individual* psalms, but about the *Psalter*, that is, about a book. In modern biblical scholarship the use of genre analysis has pushed that fact to the margins of our consciousness. Scholars are interested in individual psalms, and in their original state: the oldest form and the oldest use.

Hermann Gunkel, the father of genre criticism of the Old Testament, regarded a great many psalms as late, spiritual poetry. According to him, not all psalms were made for cultic worship. He also doubted whether the Psalter as a collection was only intended for cultic usage. But very quickly scholars, led by Sigmund Mowinckel, asserted the cultic character of all the psalms. That opinion has prevailed, at least at the unconscious level. It still shapes our scholarly work with the Psalter, even though in recent years some things have been written about a post-exilic “spiritualization” of the Psalms. For the most part even that has been done only for individual psalms.

First I want to inquire about the purpose of the psalms at the time when the Psalter was canonically determined, that is, approximately within the century when Jesus of Nazareth was born.

#### *The use of the Psalms in Jesus' time*

Some time ago Notker Füglistner summarized our present knowledge very well in a thorough essay. I will primarily follow him here.

Undoubtedly the Psalter was the best-known and most-cited book of the Old Testament in Qumran, in the New Testament, and in the witnesses to Hellenistic Judaism. It was of great significance for the religious life of Judaism.

The thesis that the Psalter was the “hymnal of the Second Temple,” on the other hand, has been refuted. It is true that levitical choirs sang certain psalms, known to us, for the people during the daily *tamid* sacrifice, and also at certain ceremonies on festival days, standing on the stairs leading from the Court of the Women to the Court of the Men (and thus not at the place where the sacrificial ritual itself took place). They took their signals from trumpeters who were placed so as to be able to observe the progress of the sacrifice. But the number of such psalms is limited, and the priests in the cult proper recited other texts, when they did not carry out their duties in complete silence.

Still less was the Psalter the “hymnal of the synagogue.” The rabbinic synagogue liturgy was, to begin with, devoid of psalms. Only in the second half of the first century C.E. was a series of psalms inserted into synagogue prayer, at the behest of pious people and against the will of the rabbinic authorities. The theses of the Karaites may also have played a part.

It was not very different in other Jewish groups. We have no definite evidence from Qumran or from the early Christian communities for the use of the Psalter in worship. Evidence of knowledge and love of the psalms is not, of itself, evidence of their liturgical use, and certainly not as

regards the entire Psalter. The Psalms entered Christian worship only toward the end of the second century, and then only individual psalms. At most we may surmise the use of psalms in ritual by the Jewish group of “Therapeutae,” who lived in Egypt.

At the same time we must relate this negative liturgical finding to the equally well attested wide knowledge and popularity of the Psalter that we have already noted. I see only one convincing explanation: The Psalter was the fundamental text for personal, individual piety. But how should we picture that concretely?

We know very little about the meditative traditions of early Judaism and Christianity. Those practices were broken off. We now travel to India - to learn how to meditate and what a mantra is. Our complete ignorance is reflected even in incorrect translations of the Bible. Thus we read in the text of the “Shema Israel” in many translations:

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and *talk about them* when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. (Deut 6:6-7)\

The correct translation, somewhat paraphrased, would be:

Memorize this text that I am proclaiming to you today. Repeat it with your children. Murmur it when you are squatting at home and when you are away, in the evening before sleeping, and in the morning when you rise.

This presumes as a matter of course that one meditates by murmuring memorized texts in the rhythm of one’s breath. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 only wants to insist that the meditated (murmured) text should be Deuteronomy.

There is a similar notion in Psalm 1. Our translations read:

Happy the one who does not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
or sit in the seat of scoffers,  
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD  
and *meditates on* his law day and night. (Ps 1:1-2)

We see the pious as thinkers. The correct translation would be:

but who is filled with joy by YHWH’s Torah,  
*reciting his Torah* day and night.

Jerome translated here:

*in lege eius meditabitur.*

However, the word *meditari* in the Latin of the monks of his time meant to speak a text from memory. The *meditatio* of the monks in their caves and

cells was a soft murmuring of texts while one squatted, rocking to and fro and weaving rush mats. One could also “meditate” by murmuring Bible texts while traveling or working together in the monastery bakery. Even the (always memorized) “reading” of the Psalms at the assemblies for prayer, which everyone listened to while sitting, could be called *meditatio*. Even if one constantly repeated the same biblical phrase over and over, this technique was *meditatio*. That is how the “Jesus prayer” of the Eastern Church developed.

The Hebrew expressions translated differently in the texts cited above all describe the technique of meditation aided by the speaking of memorized texts in a half-voiced rhythmic sing-song. Such action must have been as much a matter of course for pious Jews and Christians at the time of Jesus as is for Muslims today the continuous turning of the thirty-three-bead “rosary” while speaking the hundred names of God. The texts that individuals knew by heart were of course different in length. But in comparison to present-day capacity for memorization we can probably think of more rather than less.

That must have been the *Sitz im Leben* of the Psalter at that time. It was one of the texts that one murmured while “meditating”-unless it was in fact *the* text for that activity.

It is important to note that it was the *Psalter* that was recited. Certainly people must have selected and spoken individual psalms on occasion, and not everyone would have known the entire Psalter. Nevertheless, it was not individual psalms that were the text for meditation, but the whole *book of Psalms*. The Psalter was *one single* meditation text.

There may be an ancient tradition behind the Jewish psalm societies of today whose members promise to begin on the first day of the week by reciting Psalm 1 and to get to Psalm 150 by the Sabbath at the latest. The same may be true of the Jewish people who recite all 150 psalms daily at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

At the moment when the monks’ free, personal practice of meditation was augmented by a more sharply ritualized community form of meditation, the earliest monastic hours-and that happened rather quickly-it was at first taken as a matter of course that at least during the night Office the prayer would proceed according to the order of the Psalter. When they got to Psalm 150 they simply began again at Psalm 1, sometimes during the same worship service. This practice can be shown to have been the norm from the Pachomian monastics until the Rule of the Master at the beginning of the sixth century.

Benedict, who in shaping the daily hours was more influenced by the customs in the Roman basilicas, proposes psalms for Lauds and Compline

that are appropriate to the hour of the day, while keeping the order of the Psalter for the remaining hours (though on several parallel tracks). His awareness of the unity of the Psalter is apparent especially from the fact that he prescribes that at all times the whole of it is to be recited every week. Benedict notes that this is very little: “Since we read that our holy Fathers performed the whole Psalter with great labor in one day, let us at least do so in a whole week, despite our tepidity” (*RB* 18, 25).

The similarity of such principles to the Jewish practices of devotion mentioned above, which endure even today, speaks in favor of the notion that the monks in the Egyptian desert had not invented anything new. They had received from the common Jewish-Christian heritage the idea that the Psalter as a whole was *the* text to be recited for meditation.

If this picture of the use of the Psalter seems most probable for the time of Jesus of Nazareth, that is, very soon after the compilation of the Psalter in the form it now has, the question arises whether the *final redaction* of the book of Psalms did not create the Psalter for precisely this purpose, and whether that goal does not play a role in shaping its form. The *linking of key words* in the Psalms also speaks in favor of this idea.

#### *Redactional linking of psalms as an aid to meditation*

When Hermann Gunkel speaks of the “ordering” of the Psalms in his *Einleitung in die Psalmen* he notes several things that sound almost tragicomic. Regrettably, he finds, the psalms are not arranged according to genre. That, of course, would have been the ideal thing for the inventor of genre criticism! Then he notes that they are also not arranged according to the “authors” named in the titles of the individual psalms. The rest of the information in the titles is also only of partial use in ordering the psalms. They are not even arranged according to length, with the longer psalms preceding the shorter ones. It is true that all this, and even some other factors such as the “similarity of ideas” in neighboring psalms or “associative key words” between them may have played some role here and there. But on the whole they are really without any order. That was Gunkel’s regretful conclusion.

When Gunkel studies the “similarity of ideas” between neighboring psalms and the “associative key words” they share, his principal conversation partner is Franz Delitzsch, whose commentary, appearing first in 1860, was distinguished from all others by the fact that for each psalm he indicated links in content and in key words to the adjoining psalms. No later commentary pursued that line.

In fact, there is a linkage between neighboring psalms throughout the entire Psalter, but our awareness of the fact has almost vanished. Only in

recent years have the connections between the psalms been rediscovered, and particularly the associations of key words.

However, awareness of the linkage in the content and language of the psalms is not widespread. In spite of that, I do not want to deal with the fact itself here. I prefer to presume it as proved. I would also like to leave open the question of who created the linkages of content and key words. This was certainly the work of redaction, whether for the whole Psalter or for partial collections. But did that redaction insert additions, replace words, perhaps even compose whole new psalms? Or did it only make skillful use of existing correspondences of content and words? Probably both these things happened. My question-presupposing the facts and simply having sketched them in the above examples-concerns the extent to which such key word linkages, and with them the correspondences in content between one psalm and the others surrounding it, contribute to the reality that the Psalter as a whole became a text for meditation, to be learned by heart and murmured repeatedly over and over.

(a) An initial service of the linkage of psalms, it seems to me, is that we are *led* from one psalm to the next. Sometimes key words from the end of one psalm are simply taken up directly in the next. Thus Psalm 32 ends with the call to praise:

Be glad *in YHWH* and rejoice, *O righteous*,  
and *shout for joy*, all you *upright in heart*. (32:11)

Psalm 33:1 then follows almost like a parallel verse. One verbal root and three addresses are repeated, as well as the divine name:

*Rejoice in YHWH*, *O you righteous*. Praise befits *the upright*.

Often the connection is not so immediate. Frequently the key words are only retrieved within the content of the next psalm, or a following psalm continues one line and the next psalm takes up another. Thus at the end of Psalm 7 we read:

I will give to YHWH the *thanks* due to his righteousness,  
and *sing praise* to the *name of YHWH*, *the Most High*. (7:17)

This is followed by Psalm 8, which praises the “name” of God and is in a certain sense the fulfillment of the vow of praise at the end of Psalm 7 (which was a song of lament), but especially as praise of the *name* of God. Psalm 8 begins and ends With the sentence:

*YHWH*, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your *name in* all the earth! (8:1, 9)

But then Psalm 9 takes up the vow at the end of Psalm 7 in a still broader form, beginning a song of thanksgiving. Much more than simply the key word “name” recurs here:

I will give *thanks* to YHWH with my whole heart,  
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.  
I will be glad and exult in *you*;  
I will *sing* praise to your *name*, *O Most High*. (9:1-2)

Thus in its opening verses Psalm 9 develops the end of Psalm 7 still more than Psalm 8 had done.

As soon as the reader or user detects that kind of use of key words or motifs in a literary work as a technique, his or her expectations are raised. From then on, the phenomenon is anticipated. In the case of the Psalter this means that the ending of a psalm does not create a feeling of completion. We expect it to continue, for certain elements of content, certain formulae—even if we do not know which ones—have to find their echo, the continuation of their voice.

By that fact alone the Psalter receives a dynamic that makes it a single text. Meditation need not stand still or break off.

This is intensified when, as often happens, some elements are introduced that require whole groups of psalms for their unfolding. Something of the sort was clearly evident, in germ, at the end of Psalm 7. But these notes can extend much farther, as for example in the last part of the Psalter, Psalms 146-150, the “final Hallel.” In 145:21 David, the singer of the preceding group of psalms, announces:

*My mouth* will speak the *praise of YHWH*,  
and *all flesh* will bless his holy name forever and ever.

The word *tehillah*, “praise,” introduces Psalms 146-150, all framed by the hallelujah-shout: “Praise YHWH”—that is, the whole remainder of the Psalter. The tension in the parallelism between “my mouth” and “all flesh” anchors the great arch that with a highly significant retardation of tempo shortly before the reversal-shapes the whole. Psalm 146 begins, in vv. 1-2:

Praise YHWH, O my soul!  
I will praise YHWH as long as I live.

Thus David begins his praise of *YHWH*. In Psalm 147 the circle of singers expands. Israel/Zion takes up the song of praise. In Psalm 148 the heavenly beings and the whole of the earthly cosmos join in. But at the end of this psalm it is clear that the true reason for praise is that God has raised up a “horn” for the people. This refers to the praise that God’s *hasidim*, the

“faithful” sing in Israel. All the “*ḥasidim*,” in a sense the center of the all-encompassing praise of God:

Sing to YHWH a new song,  
his praise in *the* assembly of the *ḥasidim*. (149:1)

In Psalm 150 this song is accompanied by every conceivable instrument, and the final sentence of the last psalm reads:

Let *everything* that breathes praise YHWH. (150:6)

Here the announcement in 145:21 is fulfilled. David alone began the praise, more and more beings joined in, and now it sounds from the mouth of all flesh, that is, from the mouth of everything that breathes. It is simply impossible to stand still within Psalms 145-150; it is necessary to go on reciting from one psalm to the next.

Perhaps, in light of these observations, which could be multiplied many times over, it is easier to understand why the Psalms are not arranged by genres, primary content, speakers, titles, or length, as Gunkel would have preferred. They cannot be, for that would make the Psalter a boring set of records, a dusty archive. Under all these aspects a constant transition is necessary so that there may be life; every new psalm must be entirely new, different, surprising, and yet at the same time linked, joined. The thing that joins them is on a much more subtle level: that of linking key words, motifs, partial contents, the interplay of loose allusion and its resolution.

(b) Besides producing unity, the first achievement of the Psalms redaction, the same phenomenon of linking of content and key words, produces a second effect: the *interpenetration of aspects*. Let me illustrate this at the beginning of the Psalter.

Psalms 1, 2, and 3 are very different in genre and theme: Psalm 1 is a Torah and Wisdom psalm, Psalm 2 is part of a royal enthronement liturgy (or the imitation of one), and Psalm 3 is an individual song of lament that is at the same time presented as a morning song. The key-word links that are present nonetheless are therefore all the more astonishing.

Psalm 1 begins with a beatitude and Psalm 2 ends with one. According to Ps 1:2 the righteous meditate on (murmur) the Torah, and according to Ps 2:1 the nations conspire (murmur) vain things. Psalm 1 ends with the image of the way: YHWH knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked “will perish.” In Psalm 2, in the end the nations are warned that they will “perish” in the way. Psalm 3 immediately takes up the motif of enemies from Psalm 2 (3:1-2; cf. 7). In addition, the image in Ps 2:9 of the ruler who treads on and smashes the necks of his enemies, familiar from



Egyptian portraits of the Pharaohs, recurs in Ps 3:7, applied to God. Moreover, the expression “holy hill” recurs (2:6 and 3:4), though it is scarcely required by the principal theme. It is possible even that the end of Psalm 2, which calls blessed all those who trust in God (2:12), is an introduction to Psalm 3, which begins in vv. 1-3 with a statement of trust.

This linking achieves a very precise effect. In their genre and direct statement these three psalms are quite different, but through the chainlike linking they are, in their very difference, in some sense layered one upon the other or interleaved with one another. The righteous and the wicked, the chosen king of Israel and the nations rising up against him, the persecuted and his or her enemies are suddenly not disparate entities. They are related to one another. The boundaries between the foolishness of wicked individuals, the rising up of the nations against God’s plan for history, and the persecution of the righteous in Israel seem to dissolve, as do the distinctions between the righteous, God’s anointed, and the one who is unjustly persecuted.

Fundamental structures appear. What in one case the king does, in the other case is done by God: we sense the mystery of the intimate relationship between human and divine action. What in Psalms 2 and 3 appears to be here and now is cast into eschatological light from the perspective of the end of Psalm 1. Thus the anointed one in Psalm 2 is transparent to a Messiah at the end-time, for whom the person praying Psalm 3, oppressed by enemies, yet hopes as much as she or he hopes for God’s own action.

The linking of the first three psalms already effects in those who meditatively murmur the Psalter as a whole something like an explosion of the individual statements, a sweeping obliteration of the individual levels of interpretation. One can quickly read each of these psalms on one level or another. Everything is open to insights and still further and more penetrating comprehension. The plane becomes space in which understanding can move freely.

This process of understanding is typical of meditation. It erases the objective limitations of individual objects of contemplation, leads deeper into the foundation of things, approaches non-objectivity. In the Psalter, in contrast to some Eastern doctrines of meditation, this is never the ultimate goal of meditation. The Psalter intends to leave the one murmuring it in the tension between the individual meaning and the non-objective depth. It achieves precisely this through the fullness of its very different texts, full of reversals and exchanges, yet intensively interwoven with one another.

Of course, exegesis must also attempt to describe this will to meaning that is seated at the level of the redaction of the Psalter. As far as I can see we are still very far from such an undertaking.

In a third and final section I will return to the level of the sense of the individual psalms as given in the text. The question is whether, at least in individual cases, the final redaction that linked the psalms has altered their direct meaning by relating certain individual psalms to those nearby.

*Alteration of meaning through ordering of psalms to one another*

Let me give two examples. In the one case it is a matter of psalm-linking as dialogical dramatization, in the other of psalm-linking as introduction of a new subject-in both cases with massive consequences for what is expressed.

(a) *Psalm-linking as dialogical dramatization.* The example given is Psalms 137 and 138. We are here at the transition to the last collection of David-psalms in the Psalter, extending from Psalm 138 to Psalm 145. The collection is introduced by the lament of the Babylonian exiles in Ps 137:4:

How could we sing YHWH's song  
in a foreign land?

This lament intensifies within Psalm 137 in vv. 8-9, culminating in the wish that the destroyer Babylon should be paid back as it deserves, its children seized by enemies and smashed against a rock.

This bitter and despairing abandonment of YHWH'S praise in exile is answered by the prototypical David, transparent to the Messiah-according to the superscription of Psalm 138-with an explosive song in praise of YHWH:

. . . with my whole heart;  
before the gods . . . (138:1)

In the context of the problem created by Psalm 137 the "gods" are of course the divinities that other nations worship "afar, in a foreign land" (137:4). Many translations unfortunately make them "angels," which are completely out of place here. David has thrown himself down in prayer toward YHWH's "holy temple" in Jerusalem, because YHWH's steadfast love and faithfulness, the divine "word," extend farther than YHWH's "name," that is, the realm within which YHWH is known and worshiped by human beings (138:2). David knows from experience that whenever he has called, even from the greatest distance, his God has heard him and "increased [his] strength of soul" (138:3). In the picture of the person praying that develops here, David could dissolve into the image of the legendary Daniel who prayed toward Jerusalem during the Babylonian exile (cf. Dan 6:10).

The sense of this praise of YHWH, sounding in the Jewish diaspora, is to be that it prepares for the praise of YHWH from all the “kings of the earth,” which is coming. It will sound when the rulers of the nations have received the words that come from the mouth of YHWH (138:4). The future praise of YHWH on the part of the kings of the nations is then immediately cited in the form of a short hymn (138:5b, 6). It reveals what YHWH has effected by the “words of his mouth” and that results in the conversion of the kings of the nations to YHWH. YHWH regards the lowly (with mercy and aid), and perceives the haughty from afar (138:6). Deciphering this in light of Deutero-Isaiah, we may say that the conversion of the nations to YHWH will take place when they see how YHWH acts through a word of power on behalf of YHWH’s poor, Israel dispersed among the nations.

Read in this way, Psalm 138 is a messianic counter-position to Psalm 137, powerful in hope. The two psalms are related to each other as a dramatic dialogue, with victory belonging to the second voice, that of David. With Psalm 138 he introduces a whole collection that continues to sing with his own voice. It will work out in detail much of what is said here in Psalm 138, and at that point it will be evident that the Psalter does not simply obliterate what is said in Psalm 137. The latter expresses a deep-seated experience of persecuted Israel, and it needs to be spoken. But then it must be reversed by the attitude expressed in Psalm 138.

(b) *Psalm-linking as introduction of a new subject.* The example we shall use here is Psalms 22-26. Psalm 22, the lament whose opening Jesus spoke on the cross, not only ends in hope and vows of thanksgiving (from 22:22 on), but beginning at 22:27 this expands into a future vision of national and world dimensions that in 22:29, according to some interpreters, even surpasses the bounds of death. A reading that takes the psalm as a self enclosed model of a song of lament can, of course, only speak of the “fictive character” of the statements at this point. The nations are simply “walk-ons” to “round off the praise of God.” It is different if the praying person who comes upon Psalm 22 is well practiced in reading the psalms in their linked condition and as mutual keys to each other’s meaning. Such a one could read the psalm from the beginning as both an individual’s psalm and a psalm of Israel. She or he can also expect that the new theme introduced by the vow of thanksgiving at the end of this psalm will sound the notes of the next psalm.

In fact, Psalm 23:1 takes up the “God is king” statement of 22:28. “Shepherd” is a royal metaphor. This psalm also develops the idea of a rich meal as liturgy of thanksgiving from 22:26 and 30 into a great banquet in the “house of YHWH” (23:5-6). When the person praying 22:22 had promised to “tell” of YHWH’s “name” to his or her brothers and sisters, and the vision of the psalm culminates in 22:31 with the proclamation that

YHWH's "deeds of *righteousness*" [NRSV: deliverance] will be "told" to a future "people" yet unborn, it is almost a probability that Psalm 23 will depict that narrative. For in 23:3 we read:

He leads me in paths of *righteousness* for *his name's* sake.

If, according to 22:29, the "fat ones of the earth" cannot "keep their *soul* alive," the one Who prays Psalm 23 can say:

he restores my *soul*. (23:3)

There can thus be no doubt about the linking of these two psalms. But does the theme of the nations therefore continue?

That lies at least within the realm of possibility. For at the very beginning of Psalm 23 there is something that ordinarily does not emerge in our translations. We usually translate:

The Lord is my shepherd.

In our modern languages that sounds as if a believer in YHWH were applying a new title to the God YHWH, whom she or he has always worshiped, seeing YHWH in a new image, that of a shepherd. But according to the rules for word order in Hebrew nominal sentences, what is new here is the divine name. That is: everyone has a "shepherd." The question is only *whom* one has as one's shepherd. In Psalm 23 "David" declares:

My shepherd is [not Assyria, not Marduk, not one of the other gods of the nations, but] YHWH.

Thus the statement is something in the nature of a declaration of faith pronounced by a new convert who is certain that, led by his or her new divine shepherd, he or she can enter on the (very dangerous) path that will lead to a place where a table is set and the cups are filled. That place is the Temple of YHWH (23:6). Psalm 24 will then immediately speak of entering the Temple. Given that singular and plural have already begun to superimpose themselves on each other within the Psalter, this fits clearly within the perspective of the eschatological conversion of the nations that was introduced at the end of Psalm 22. We can at least say that, as a result of the linking of the two psalms, this is one of the possibilities given for understanding Psalm 23. The theme of the pilgrimage of the nations could be echoed in the path through the dark valley. The nations not yet converted to the God of Israel would be the enemies in the psalm.

With this openness to the theme "pilgrimage of nations," Psalm 23 prepares for Psalm 24, which, as I will show, speaks clearly about that pil-

grimace. But first let me say something about the links between these two psalms.

The movement in Psalm 23 ends with the “house of YHWH” (23:6); Psalm 24 takes place on the “hill of YHWH” (24:3) and deals with access to this “holy place.” While the one praying 23:3 was traveling on the “paths of righteousness” [NRSV: “right paths”], these are revealed in Ps 24:5 to be paths *to* “righteousness,” for “blessing from YHWH, vindication from the God of their salvation” comes to those who are admitted to the sanctuary. Thus the two psalms are indeed linked. What is Psalm 24 about?

In 24:3 the question of the conditions for access to the sanctuary on Zion, familiar to those praying the Psalms from 15:1, is taken up again:

Who shall ascend the hill of YHWH?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?

Who are the people whose access to the Temple is in question? After the listing of conditions for access (v. 4) and a promise of blessing and justification (v. 5), they are addressed as follows in v. 6:

Such is the company of those who ask [NRSV: “seek”] him (=YHWH),  
who seek thy face, O Jacob [NRSV: “who seek the face of the God of  
Jacob”].

The verbs “ask” and “seek” are familiar parallels to those who pray the Psalms. But here their objects are not parallel. The second breaks out of the readers’ expectations, which have been steered toward a reference to God. If we do not resort to the Septuagint here (as, unfortunately, all our translations do: see the NRSV usage)-which evidently found the statement in these verses unbearable-those whose access to the sanctuary is in question are non-Israelites, people from the “nations.” For since they desire to see “Jacob’s face,” they cannot themselves belong to Jacob (= Israel).

In its Hebrew/Masoretic version Psalm 24 is therefore specifically about the eschatological pilgrimage of the nations to Zion. Together with Isa 2:2-5 = Mic 4:1-5, Psalm 24 may be the most important text on this subject. For that reason, it seems, it also begins with a confession of YHWH, the Lord of the whole world and all its inhabitants (vv. 1-2). Therefore the conditions of access include only purity of heart and hand, together with exclusive worship of the one true God, without reference (as was the case in Psalm 15) to specifically Israelite precepts, for example the prohibition of exacting interest on money.

Hence a major bridge is begun in the final verses of Psalm 22. At least by the time she or he reaches Psalm 24 the person praying is aware that Psalm 23 was primarily to be understood in terms of the approach of the nations to Zion. In turn, in light of Psalm 23 one of the most revolutionary statements in

Psalm 24, little noticed for what it is despite all attempts to reconstruct ritual sequences in it, is contextualized, at least in the broader text.

In Psalm 24 the subject is the entry of the nations into the holy city on the mountain of YHWH (v. 3). There they will receive blessing and justification from YHWH (v. 5). But when, beginning in 24:7, the entry into the sanctuary is played out in a kind of festive liturgy at the portal it is not the nations who enter, but YHWH. It may indeed be the case that an ancient portal liturgy from a time when there were still Ark processions in Jerusalem is being revived here. But in the current psalm it should be the nations who enter. Still, entry is demanded by YHWH, the “king of glory,” and it is not immediately granted. As long as YHWH appears as “strong” and “mighty in battle” (v. 8), the gates do not lift up their heads. Only when YHWH appears merely as “YHWH of hosts” can he enter into his own mountain (v. 10). It seems that at this late period “YHWH Sabaoth (= of hosts)” did not designate-if it ever had-a “God of the hosts of war.” Instead, we should read the title in light of the parallel in Isa 54:5 (“YHWH of hosts is his name . . . the God of the whole earth he is called”) or through the principal translation of the term in the Septuagint, *pantokratōr*, “ruler of all.” Then the circle from the beginning of the psalm is closed, and in particular the kerygma of the pilgrimage-of-nations texts from Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 is brought within it: the turning of the nations to Zion is connected with an end to wars. At the eschatological moment of the pilgrimage of the nations YHWH will personally appear on Zion, as if anew, no longer as the warrior hero, but as the Lord of the whole world who peacefully gathers all the nations. This dialectic of the entry of the God to whom the nations come is-and here I again return to the crucial point already anticipated, since in Psalm 23 YHWH as the “shepherd” goes with the one who prays the psalm to Jerusalem. If the one praying the psalm stands for the nations, the astonishing reversal of aspect in Ps 24:7 has long been prepared for through Psalm 23 as a whole.

In Psalm 23, then, the linking of the psalms has produced a change of *subject*. The same process continues after Psalm 24, which of course is linked forward as well. As in Psalm 15, so in Ps 24:4 the conditions for admission to the sanctuary are listed. The third is:

. . . who do not *lift up* their *souls* to what is false.

This condition directly corresponds to the opening of Psalm 25:

To you, O YHWH, I *lift up* my *soul*.

This, in the first place, makes it clear that “what is false” in 24:4 does not refer, for example, to false statements (as our translations seem to imply),

but to false, nonexistent gods. But in particular Psalm 25, which opens in this way, proves to be a prayer for the people who, according to Psalm 24, seek admission to Zion's sanctuary. Thus in the minds of those responsible for the Psalms redaction Psalm 25 is meant to show how the people of the nations are to pray there. As a result of the linkage Psalm 25, which in isolation would naturally be read simply in terms of Israel or an individual Israelite, has become a prayer of the nations. As this psalm formulates its prayer, so will the nations speak when "in days to come" they come to the sanctuary on Zion.

I cannot explain in detail what that means. Let me simply draw attention to two points. When YHWH has forgiven the sins of the one who prays Psalm 25 and taught her or him YHWH's ways, that person, like Israel of old, will "possess the land" (25:13). In addition, according to v. 14 she or he will even have entrée into Israel as God's holy "assembly" and to the "covenant." The last, especially, is an unheard-of statement, for nowhere else in the entire Hebrew Bible is the "covenant" opened to the "nations."

Since Psalm 26 also refers back to the conditions of access in Ps 24:4 and in addition is closely linked to Psalm 25, even here we can think of a praying person from the nations as the subject of the psalm. But I will only mention that in passing.

### *Conclusions*

The last example was quite extensive. But it may be the only way to show that considering the redaction of the Psalter is not an idle game. If we do not venture it, and instead stick with isolated individual psalms, it may be that important hopes of Israel that are only expressed at this level of the text will escape our notice.

The redaction of the Psalms is still altogether "Old" Testament. But, as we have seen, it achieves an astonishing closeness to the "New" Testament. There remains only a thin wall between the two. The more we enter into the intentions of the Psalter's redaction, the stronger is the impression that there is not a yawning abyss between the "Old" and "New" Testaments, but that the "new" of the "New Testament" is almost nothing but the assertion that what previously could only be formulated as hope and anticipated future has now, in fact, come.

An ordering of the psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours that forces them all into individuality because it does not leave the psalms in the redactionally-created context that represents their immanent hermeneutic not only leads to difficulties in Christians' reading of them. It systematically destroys a true Old Testament reading as well.

If what I have said in this essay is accurate, we cannot avoid a series of practical consequences that I would like to list here in conclusion.

1. It is urgently necessary that biblical scholars pursue in detail the aspects of the Psalter that I have been discussing and that have so long been neglected. At the present time, indeed, they have at their disposal, because of the advances in computer technology, much better research aids for the series of investigations that need to be made than were available in the past.

2. The available translations of the Bible are for the most part unsuitable for indicating to non-scholars the phenomena in the text of the Psalter that have been uncovered here. The images are often reduced to abstractions, the key word correspondences have been lost, the language lacks the density and rhythm that are necessary if people are to learn texts and be able to recite them again and again without their becoming insipid in our mouths. In German, the translation by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig comes closest to what is asked for here. What is needed is an urgent effort to create a better modern-language Psalter than what we currently have.

3. Christians in search of the forms of Christian meditation, especially in contemplative communities, must have the courage to return to the meditative origins of their own tradition. We must learn again to recite the memorized Psalter as "meditation." The last trace elements of this tradition have been preserved, almost to our own day, far down in the much-despised popular devotion of reciting Hail Marys in the rosary. It is no accident that in many places the threefold rosary with its 150 Hail Marys is called a "psalter." Here, and in prayer forms such as the Jesus Prayer, are the starting points for what could take shape once again.

4. If it should happen that something new/old grows in this realm of personal meditative experience, there can also be hope that in another liturgical reform, which will certainly be necessary at some time, the original form of the Liturgy of the Hours in which the psalms were not yet torn apart and isolated can be recovered. Then it will no longer be necessary to mutilate the Psalter by leaving out individual psalms or parts of psalms, because the Psalter will be able once again to take command of its own hermeneutic.



## Chapter 6 Psalter and Meditation

This chapter originated with a guest lecture given in Mainz on January 17, 1991. Its scholarly publication, with extensive documentation, was entitled “Psalmengebet und Psalterredaktion,” *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 34 (1992) 1–22. Let me refer especially to Notker Fuglister, “Die Verwendung und das Verständnis der Psalmen und des Psalters um die Zeitenwende,” in Josef Schreiner, ed., *Beiträge zur Psalmenforschung. Psalm 2 und 22*. FzB 60 (Würzburg: Echter, 1988) 319–94; Georg Braulik, “Christologisches Verständnis der Psalmen—schon im Alten Testament?” in Klemens Richter and Benedikt Kranemann, eds., *Christologie der Liturgie. Der Gottesdienst der Kirche—Christusbekenntnis und Sinaibund*. QD 159 (Freiburg: Herder, 1995) 57–86; see also the recent publications by Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, Erich Zenger, and Gianni Barbiero.