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# Rebaptising the Psalter

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## 1. Introduction

This paper has the goal of making a contribution to the retrieval of the psalms in Baptist worship and devotion. It has two underpinning motivations. First, to prolong a conversation about Baptist biblical hermeneutics which began with a three-day meeting in January 2009 and resulted in the book, *The “Plainly Revealed” Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, to address the lacuna in the place of the psalter in contemporary Baptist circles. The approach adopted here is to consider what it means to read the psalms (section 2), the nature of the psalmist encountered in the psalter (section 3), and some hermeneutical factors (section 4). This paper closes with some conclusions as to what a Baptist retrieval of the psalms might look like.

## 2. Reading the Psalter

### 2.1 Who ‘reads’ the Psalms?

Although Baptists have a firm commitment to the Bible the psalms do not play a uniform, or especially prominent, role in Baptist personal devotion or corporate worship today. Arguably the book of psalms had its greatest influence among Baptists through Spurgeon’s remarkable expositions of the psalms, published over the course of twenty years in *The Sword and Trowel* and eventually made available as *The Treasury of David*.<sup>2</sup> The ups and downs of the psalms in Baptist

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (editors), *The “Plainly Revealed” Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 6 volumes (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1905). See also Ian Stackhouse, *Praying Psalms: A Personal Journey Through the Psalter* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2018) for a recent celebration of psalmody by a Baptist. The author has made a modest attempt at retrieving the penitential psalms for

circles is in stark contrast to their solid ubiquity in Christianity prior to the Reformation. More widely, the book of psalms has occupied a unique place in piety and theology throughout wider church history.<sup>3</sup> Key theologians, including Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin looked to the psalms for doctrine, instruction, and personal transformation. The 150 psalms have also exerted a huge influence on art, literature, liturgy, and sung worship over more than two millennia.<sup>4</sup> In some church traditions biblical psalms are the only permitted sung worship, an understanding of sung worship known as exclusive psalmody. In other traditions they have been given a central place, such as in the English choral tradition and the *Book of Common Prayer*.

One of the features that enables the psalms to occupy this special place is the ease with which a connection is established between text and ‘reader’. The emotional dynamic that enables this was expressed well by Calvin who famously saw the psalter as providing ‘An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul’.<sup>5</sup> He was building on the similar, and much earlier, insights of Athanasius.<sup>6</sup> More recently Walter Brueggemann explained this phenomenon with acute interpretive insight, in his typology of function paradigm.<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann argued that the twin poles of orientation and disorientation are shared by the psalmist and the contemporary reader.<sup>8</sup> In this way the gap between ‘then’ and ‘now’ is closed.<sup>9</sup> This ease of connection between text and modern reader is coherent with the early Baptist doctrine of the plain reading

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the wider church in Mark J. Whiting, *The Penitential Psalms Today: A Journey with Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143* (Cambridge: Grove, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> This is surveyed extensively in Susan Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*, volumes 1 to 3, Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, 2018 and 2022.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: Psalms*, Volume 1, James Anderson (translator) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) xxxvii.

<sup>6</sup> Athanasius, ‘Letter to Marcellinus’, 97–119 in *On the Incarnation*, A religious of CSMV (translator), (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 103.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, ‘Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function’ in P. D. Miller (ed.), *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 3–32.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, ‘Psalms and the Life’, 6–9.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, ‘Psalms and the Life’, 7.

of scripture. This is not to suggest that these ancient texts don't pose some challenges to the modern Christian reader, on the contrary, the resulting questioning and reflection is arguably beneficial for those imbibing them—i.e., there is ease of connection and substance to benefit from. This idea raises an important question as to whether this possibility has been eclipsed by contemporary Christian worship music, often criticised for its more limited emotional dynamic range and lack of deeper theological insight.

## **2.2 Reading redefined**

The term 'reading' is rather one-dimensional for describing the rich interpretive and transformative process of someone engaging with the psalms as scripture.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the contemporary solo and silent engagement with the Bible, which comes to mind, excludes some historically significant ways in which the psalter has been used and has functioned, for more than two millennia. Throughout this paper the word 'reading' should be understood in the broader sense outlined below.

Reading a psalm is a practice that predates the formation of the book of psalms found in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Scholars have long speculated on the origin of individual psalms and there is not space here to consider this in detail. The basic point that needs to be appreciated, however, is that individual psalms originate from a variety of different contexts. These include liturgical use in specific religious rites, temple worship, local community use, and as didactic literature. It is the case, however, that complete certitude regarding the creation of any one specific psalm is often obscured by the editing that they have undoubtedly undergone to bring them together as a purposeful collection.<sup>11</sup> On this basis, we can appreciate that the term 'reading' is anachronistic if used in its everyday contemporary sense. Using a specific psalm might originally have meant, for example, hearing

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 217–247.

<sup>11</sup> An especially insightful proposal for this shaping process is explored in Nancy deClaisse-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997).

spoken liturgy in a rite such as a king's coronation, singing hymns in the temple, reciting a prayer of healing, as well as reading with didactic intent. If these were some of the original uses, we can expect that there are times when psalms can, and indeed should, be used creatively, dramatically, and liturgically in similar ways today.<sup>12</sup> Until the aftermath of the Reformation, reading the psalter comprised a broad range of activities, and this pre-critical interpretation universally took place from a stance of faith and a context of praxis. The term reading herein refers to any intentional act of appropriating the meaning and significance of an individual psalm or the psalter in either an individual or corporate context.

During the Reformation the new-found impetus of *sola scriptura*, the impact of the printing press, and the rise of the university, all contributed to a complex process which led to a divergence in understanding of, on the one hand psalms as written texts, and on the other their use in the church. While this was inevitable, and not undesirable *per se*, at its most extreme scholarly study of the psalter was at odds with long-established interpretive paradigms. This is certainly true of the two dominant critical approaches that matured in the first seventy years, or so, of the 20th century. These two approaches are sketched below as a prelude to understanding the more recent growing scholarly consensus—a very different paradigm which is coherent with reading the psalms and the psalter in the church and in personal devotion.

### **2.3 A critical turn**

Critical scholarship on the psalms, in the first half of the 20th century, was dominated by the work of the German Old Testament scholar Herman Gunkel.<sup>13</sup> His work is generally termed form criticism because

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<sup>12</sup> This is key part of Brueggemann's basis for his interpretive paradigm in which he pays serious attention to the psalms liturgically, devotionally, and pastorally, see Brueggemann, 'Psalms and the Life', 6.

<sup>13</sup> His two key works on the psalms, which have been translated into English, are Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, T. M. Horner (translator), (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967) and Herman Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, completed by Joachim Begrich and translated by James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).

of its privileging of a psalm's form within the interpretive process, with a view to understanding how it was originally used. Gunkel's goal was to understand the *Sitz im Leben* (situation in life) of each psalm, or the ideal psalm from which it originated. Gunkel's work was undoubtedly insightful, but it had the rather unhelpful consequence of fragmenting the psalter into individual psalms and, in some cases, dividing psalms into more than one composition. Gunkel went further than this in his pursuit of ideal psalm forms, proposing what is now an indefensible hypothesis that Jewish religion declined after a golden age in the 8th century BCE.<sup>14</sup> Gunkel identified many of the biblical psalms as late and religiously deficient compositions, because they mixed the various types he had proposed.<sup>15</sup> This led to the view that although psalmody started as cult worship, the later psalms originated outside the cult.<sup>16</sup> This typifies the potential of historical critical methods to eclipse scripture with something else, in this case hypothetical psalms rather than the psalter.<sup>17</sup>

The Norwegian scholar, Sigmund Mowinckel, built on Gunkel's work by considering a closer connection between biblical psalms and Temple worship. Where Gunkel privileged literary form and ancient context over more traditional interpretive approaches, Mowinckel made the ancient cultic context central to his scholarly interpretive paradigm. Mowinckel's approach is sometimes known as cult criticism because of the importance of not only Temple worship but its dependence on a hypothetical autumn cultic festival.<sup>18</sup> This and other rival hypothetical festivals, including that proposed by the Baptist scholar Aubrey Johnson, became something of a scholarly

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<sup>14</sup> Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, 331–332.

<sup>15</sup> Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, 330.

<sup>16</sup> Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> See John E. Colwell 'The Word of His Grace: What's so Distinctive about Scripture?' in Dare and Woodman, *Plainly Revealed*, 208.

<sup>18</sup> The reconstruction of this hypothetical festival supplies a framework which underpins much of his two-volume work: Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, volumes I and II (Oxford: Blackwells, 1962).

preoccupation in the middle of the 20th century.<sup>19</sup> The highly speculative nature of these approaches, and more recent scholarly developments, have meant that the privileging of such a paradigm has fallen into abeyance, but many of the broader insights are viewed as having ongoing value. Gunkel's work still provides the basic terminology for categorising the psalms today.

#### **2.4 A canonical twist**

Whatever the scholarly merits of this historical critical study of the psalms, it drove a wedge between study of the psalms in the academy and use of the psalter in gathered worship and personal devotion. Two more recent developments have been found to have greater promise at enabling scholarly rigour to cohere with ongoing psalm use. One of these, briefly mentioned above, was proposed by Brueggemann. The second is different in nature to Brueggemann's but is in no sense antagonistic to it. This approach's origin can be traced to Brevard Childs who proposed what is now termed canonical criticism as an attempt to address the sharp divide between modern critical approaches and understanding the Bible as scripture. In his study of the *Old Testament as Scripture* he argued that the book of psalms has a number of features that point to it being a literary whole that has been formed with intent.<sup>20</sup> Gerald Wilson, who studied for his PhD under Childs' supervision, examined the extrabiblical and biblical data that supports the hypothesis of purposeful editorial intent in a series of works.<sup>21</sup> The overarching principle of discernible editorial intent in the purposeful shaping of the psalter has been adopted as the dominant contemporary scholarly paradigm for current psalms research.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The two most important rival hypotheses are proposed in Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel*, second edition (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1962) and Kraus, H., *Worship in Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966).

<sup>20</sup> Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979) 522–523.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico: CA, Scholars Press, 1985).

<sup>22</sup> How such an approach might have taken place in the context of biblical Israel is laid out in deClaisé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning, passim*. A recent publication demonstrates the still growing consensus in terms of the tone and arguments proposed by its diverse contributors, see David M. Howard Jr. and Andrew J. Schmutzer (editors), *Reading the Psalms Theologically* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2023).

If we accept that the psalter is shaped by its final editors, and that they did this purposefully, then it is necessary to consider the psalter as in some sense a literary and theological unity rather than a disparate hodgepodge of texts. While such notions of a complex editing process might trouble those of a more fundamentalist persuasion, Fiddes points out that the Baptist scholar H. Wheeler Robinson sees here the principle of the regenerate church worked out for the Old Testament prophetic books:

when we abandon the literal view that each prophetic book is simply written by the named prophet and when we detect a whole process of transmitting oracles, commenting on them and adding new ones to them in succeeding years, then we find revealed the presence of a community of faithful people who are keeping a vision alive.<sup>23</sup>

By simple extension this idea applies to the editing of the psalms. This means that an understanding of individual psalms requires (in addition to reading them as individual compositions) attention to their wider literary context within the psalter. Such a paradigm also provides fertile ground for theological readings of the psalter and has a natural affinity with reading the psalms from a stance of faith.

### **3. The Psalmist**

#### ***3.1 The righteous psalmist***

Any attempt to take the psalter seriously as a purposeful collection gives rise to the possibility of reading the psalms from the perspective of a single author. This implied author reveals, time and again, that they consider themselves righteous. So prominent is this self-understanding that the psalmist is prone to being misunderstood. Rather than sharing the psalmist's commitment to being set apart by

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<sup>23</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, 'Prophecy, Corporate Personality, and Suffering: Some Themes and Methods in Baptist Old Testament Scholarship' in Dare and Woodman, *Plainly Revealed*, 79.



Yahweh (e.g., Psalm 4:3) or devotion to the law (e.g., Psalm 1:1–2) the modern reader might see the psalmist as self-righteous and legalistic. Such misconceptions about the psalmist, for misconceptions they most certainly are, will be considered at the end of this section.

Traditionally the righteous implied author was identified with King David as he was assumed to be the actual author of the book of psalms. This understanding is found in ancient literature and the New Testament. For example, according to The Psalms Scroll (11Q5) found at Qumran, David was the author of some 4,050 psalms.<sup>24</sup> At a similar time, the author of the letter of the Hebrews viewed David as the literal author of Psalm 95, a psalm which is not attributed to David in the Masoretic textual tradition, see Hebrews 4:7. Despite this widely held view, such a uniform conception of Davidic authorship is questioned by many features of the psalter itself, including clear allusions to the exile (e.g. Psalm 137:1), the psalm headings which point to other psalmists including the Korahites, Asaph, Heman the Ezrahite, etc., and the use of term ‘of David’, which heads some 72 psalms having a range of potential meanings, not just authorship. Most scholars today doubt whether many, if any, canonical psalms were penned by David. This does not alter the fact that the received text of 150 psalms implies a very close connection with David. This is evident in the widespread use of the Hebrew term translated as ‘of David’ in the MT (later versions of the book of psalms such as the Greek Septuagint and Syriac Peshitta have additional psalms identified as Davidic).<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, some psalms, termed biographical psalms, are intentionally linked to episodes in David’s life: Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63 and 142. Even though there are good reasons to see these biographical headings as late, if we take the final form of the psalter seriously, we need to pay attention to them. Those that edited the psalter, as it took its final shape, saw David’s life as an interpretive lens. More attention is given to these biographical headings in section 3.2 below.

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<sup>24</sup> William P. Brown, ‘The Psalms: An Overview’, 1–23 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* edited by William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, ‘The Psalms: An Overview’, 3.

Arguing that the psalter is Davidic might not seem to advance a compelling argument as to the righteousness of the psalmist. David's failures, such as adultery (2 Samuel 11:2–5) and arranging the death of Bathsheba's husband Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11:14–15), seem at odds with such a claim. This is due in part to a misconception of the psalmist's claim of righteousness as a statement of moral perfection. It also needs to be appreciated that there are distinct threads of editorial intent. Grant has shown that some psalms are concerned with the ideal Davidic king.<sup>26</sup> These are a subset of so-called royal psalms, 2, 18 and 118, that have been deliberately placed alongside the Torah psalms: Psalms 1, 19 and 119. This editorial intent provides justification for the tradition of reading the psalms with a Davidic lens. Our ancestors in the Middle-Ages saw beyond David's moral failure, and were inspired by his contrition and compunction, perceiving him as the ideal penitent.

The translators of the Septuagint, the Qumran community, and early Rabbinic Judaism all saw Psalm 1 as intentionally paired with Psalm 2, to provide an entry into the psalter.<sup>27</sup> These two psalms are linked in a number of ways by linguistic devices.<sup>28</sup> The uniqueness of both psalms 1 and 2 and their intentional unity at the start of the psalter indicates that their content is in some sense a hermeneutical key to the whole psalter.<sup>29</sup> The psalter's final shape was established well into the post-exilic period,<sup>30</sup> and consequently one emphasis is on portraying David

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<sup>26</sup> Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) *passim*.

<sup>27</sup> So, for example, Robert L. Cole, 'Psalms 1–2: The Psalter's Introduction', 183–195 in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul* edited by Andrew J. Schmutzer and David M. Howard Jr. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013) 184.

<sup>28</sup> Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> So, Mark J Whiting, 'Psalms 1 and 2 as a Hermeneutical Lens for Reading the Psalter', *Evangelical Quarterly* 85 (2013): 246–262. See, however, David Willgren, 'Why Psalms 1–2 Are Not to Be Considered a Preface to the "Book" of Psalms', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 130 (2018): 384–397.

<sup>30</sup> deClairessé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 19 argues that 'the Psalter achieved its "substantial" form sometime in the late Persian/early Greek period (late 4<sup>th</sup> century)',

redux—the future Davidic messiah. So, for example, although Psalm 2 might have had a much earlier life as a liturgical psalm used in a rite such as the king’s coronation, in common with other such psalms, editorial intent in terms of minor editing and its placement invest it with this new perspective.

This pairing of these two psalms means that the ‘blessed man’ of Psalm 1 can be understood as the anointed king of Psalm 2. When we consider the combined attributes of this Davidic king, we see that re-reading this ideal as the risen Christ was the most natural of interpretive moves for the early Christians. It is therefore unsurprising that Psalm 2 is quoted seven times in the New Testament (Acts 4:25–26, 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5; Revelation 2:26–27, 12:5, 19:15). The torah-delighting anointed king is an ideal figure and provides a basis for reading the psalter Davidically (in anticipation of the coming king) or Christologically.<sup>31</sup> Grant explores two other psalm groupings which build on this ideal figure: Psalms 18–21 and Psalms 118/119.<sup>32</sup> Christological readings after the Enlightenment have often been judged suspect by the academy but it can be argued that Baptist readings of the Bible are necessarily Christological due to ‘the experiential and conversionist theology Baptists profess.’<sup>33</sup>

Psalm 2 makes it clear that the Davidic king is chosen by God as he is anointed to be ruler. David, the first of this line, was chosen by God when the previous king, Saul, had lost favour with God. David was chosen, according to the prophet Samuel, despite his outward appearance (a contrast to the tall handsome Saul, see 1 Samuel 9:2) and because of his good heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Although the historical David was not ideal on the outside this did not prevent him from wielding the power of a king. The eschatological David, anticipated in

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but acknowledges that there was some ongoing fluidity regarding the order of Book IV and V until the 1st century CE.

<sup>31</sup> Grant, *The King as Exemplar*, 41–56.

<sup>32</sup> Grant, *The King as Exemplar*, 71–188.

<sup>33</sup> So, for example, Ian Birch, ‘Baptists and Biblical Interpretation: Reading the Bible with Christ’, in Dare and Woodman, *Plainly Revealed*, 171.

Psalm 2, exemplifies earthly power at its most potent; ready to conquer the nations that conspire against his God (Psalm 2:8).

The picture we have looked at thus far regarding the Davidic king of the psalter exemplifies what might be termed the David of faith. Such a portrait is incomplete, as alongside the promise of this righteous leader who can defy nations there is another. In the next section the suffering of the historical King David, the David of history, as portrayed in the psalter, is considered.

### ***3.2 The suffering psalmist***

When reading the psalter, it becomes apparent that the psalmist knows suffering, as well as blessing. Sometimes this spectrum of experience seems puzzling as the psalter moves from one pole to the other. This takes place frequently even within the same psalm. In terms of the Davidic lens the portrait painted in Psalms 1, 2, 18–21, 118 and 119, considered above, idealises the future David with little or no hint of trial or suffering. The biographical psalms do quite the opposite. There is, it might be said, a tension between the past David of history and the future David of faith. In Christological terms when Jesus is viewed as the psalmist, the psalms examined in section 3.1 exemplify a theology of glory consistent with the risen and ascended Christ, whilst the biographically headed psalms, and indeed many others, have a theology of suffering, or theology of the cross.<sup>34</sup> For example, these psalms testify that David, the psalmist:

1. Has many enemies (so, for example, 3:1; 7:1; 18:3, 17; 54:3; 56:1; 57:4; 59:2; 60:12; 142:3).
2. Is in need of deliverance (see 3:7; 7:6; 59:1; 60:5).
3. Faces, or has faced, death (so 18:4; 54:3; 56:13, 63:9).

It will be noted that Psalm 18 is simultaneously one of the groups considered in section 3.1 and one of the biographical psalms. This psalm is interesting in combing the two distinct Davidic threads.

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<sup>34</sup> The terms ‘theology of glory’ and ‘theology of the cross’ are used here without the intention of invoking Luther’s polar choice between a *theologia gloriae* and a *theologia crucis*.

Importantly the psalter, as a whole, unites these two Davidic concerns. Read from a Christological perspective, the combination of the two poles takes on new significance. In addition, it should be noted that throughout the biographical psalms, where the psalmist consistently cries out in anguish, there is an incredibly strong sense of trust in Yahweh on the part of the psalmist. This is found in a range of metaphors that share a common semantic range implying protection, these include: a hand held shield (Psalms 3, 5 and 18), an angel of the Lord being encamped around the psalmist (Psalm 34), the walls of Jerusalem (Psalm 51), being in the house of God (Psalm 52), the concept of evil recoiling as off a shield (Psalm 54), refuge under Yahweh's wings (Psalm 57), being in a fortress or fortified city (Psalm 59 and 60), and the idea of refuge. The connection between the sufferings of the biblical prophets (in this case David), Christ and the reader was developed by the Baptist scholar H. Wheeler Robinson at length.<sup>35</sup>

### ***3.3 The David of history and the David of faith***

We have seen that the Davidic lens reveals a psalmist with a dual nature. On the one hand he is the King David of history, crying out to God in desperate need of deliverance. On the other hand, he is David redux, the King David of faith, the ideal king who has survived the trials and tribulations of the life of faith to return again—he is God's perfect anointed (for example, Psalms 2:2; 89:20 and 132:17), as well as God's metaphorical son (Psalm 2:7), who will bring about justice and subdue the nations (Psalms 2:9 and 110:1). The David of history, time-and-again, is seen to exemplify trust whatever his current experience. In many psalms he is also righteous and makes decisions that are right before God. Even when he has sinned, his hope in God indicates that he anticipates restoration and a fresh start as righteous, see Psalm 51 with attention to its heading. In a sense the righteousness and right choices of the psalmist explain this journey from the historical suffering David to the ideal vindicated future Davidic king.

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<sup>35</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Cross in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955).

In a similar fashion when the psalmist is perceived as Jesus Christ we can read the biographical psalms and the individual laments as the words of Jesus who, had nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20 and Luke 9:58), had powerful enemies (e.g. Mark 14:55), was betrayed by his friends (Mark 14:18; 14:66–72), was tortured (Mark 15:16–19), and executed on a cross (e.g. Mark 15:27ff). Such a hermeneutical trajectory is even legitimised by Jesus’s self-identification as he uses Psalm 22 while dying nailed to a cross (Mark 15:34). Unlike King David he did not sin, but like David his life of trust vindicated him and was the basis for understanding how a man who embodied a theology of the cross could rise again as proof of a theology of glory. In Jesus the Messiah, the promised Davidic king has appeared—the surprise is that he not only embodies the promise of glory, but this can only be perfected in suffering. We turn now to the fuller complexity of psalm interpretation; whereby various paradigms are explored, and the role of the reader is considered.

#### 4. The Psalter and Hermeneutics

##### *4.1 Fusing horizons and reader response*

It was the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer who formalised the hermeneutical process of contemporary understanding of an ancient text as a fusion of horizons.<sup>36</sup> His illuminating idea is that a text is understood when there is a connection between two contexts (or horizons), ancient and contemporary, which leads to new hermeneutical position. This is very much the nature of Brueggemann’s typology of function model of individual psalm interpretation—where the origin of a psalm in the context of orientation, disorientation, or reorientation maps organically to a contemporary experience of the same type.<sup>37</sup> It is helpful to consider how the various paradigms of understanding the psalms facilitate Gadamer’s fusion of horizons and Brueggemann’s connection between modern reader and the ancient text’s function.

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<sup>36</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (2nd Ed. Rev.; London: Sheed & Ward, 1989) 306–307; 374; 576–577 and *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> Brueggemann, ‘Psalms and the Life of Faith’, 7.

The form critical and cult critical methods, by their very nature, viewed individual psalms as a combination of idealised forms and expressions of hypothetical ancient contexts. This makes them legitimate approaches for understanding some aspects of the origin, nature, and function of ancient psalms. They do, however, have a tendency to put so much emphasis on the ancient text and original reconstructed context so as to build a barrier preventing appropriation of a psalm from a stance of faith. The canonical critical approach offers greater potential for such appropriation of the psalms because the gap between then and now is lessened. This approach is built on the inherent assumption that the editing of the book of psalms—the shaping of the psalter—was done from a perspective of faith. This not only facilitates fusion, in Gadamer’s language, it is also compatible with the pre-critical approaches that church history so readily testifies to the spiritual value of other the centuries.

The Davidic and Christological approaches discussed above are, in origin, both pre-critical approaches. The former is, to an extent, one lens of the psalter’s final editors, as illustrated above with reference to Grant’s work on Psalms 1, 2, 18–21, 118 and 119. The latter approach originated from the former by virtue of a change in the horizon of some readers through exile and return. What is being suggested is that a Christian who follows the Jesus Christ who both suffered and rose again cannot help but read the psalter Christologically.<sup>38</sup> More specifically this will be a reading through the twin poles of his suffering and glorification. Augustine famously read the psalms with a hermeneutical approach that has become known as the *totus Christus*—the whole Christ—in which Christ is understood to be praying the whole psalter. In those parts that might be deemed messianic, such as Psalm 110, he prays as the glorified Christ, i.e., the head of the church. In contrast the laments and penitential psalms, such as Psalm 3 and Psalm 6 respectively, are prayed by the church, i.e., the body of Christ.<sup>39</sup> In this way the Christ event, the psalter, and human

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<sup>38</sup> So, for example, Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> See Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 56–64 and *passim*.

experience each revolve around two poles: cross/suffering and glory/joy.

#### ***4.2 Reading legitimately***

One, and it is only one, of the reasons why there exists a plurality of interpretive approaches for reading the psalter is that the reader's stance makes a fundamental difference. We can appreciate that someone worshipping in a Baptist church on Good Friday will read Psalm 22 through a different lens compared to an atheist professor conducting a philological study of the Hebrew text of Psalm 22. The former makes a reading dependent on the rule of faith,<sup>40</sup> and the latter with a 'scientific' agenda.

One of the challenges of a plurality of readings is that of legitimacy. This is especially acute for what can be termed reader response approaches. If the meaning comes, at least, in part from the reader is this not at the expense of the text? Both Brueggemann's approach and Gadamer's fusion of horizons can amount to forms of reader response criticism. Both recognise pragmatically what happens when the psalter is read. The words of the ancient author mediated through the Davidic story, the Christ event, and the reader's situation in life quicken the text and it is appropriated. Sometimes this process is said to reveal the elasticity of a psalm—it bends and stretches as the reader's experience connects current situation to ancient situation, or horizon to horizon.

In post-modern hermeneutics the question of the legitimacy of the many possible readings of a text is especially acute. Importantly, however, the earlier Modern quest for a single interpretive lens was problematic for quite different reasons. Psalm scholarship and devotional readings of the psalter have been blighted, more than for any other part of the Bible, by singular approaches that eclipse or at least exhibit hegemony over all others. This was especially the case with form critical and cult critical approaches. Multiple readings are

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<sup>40</sup> See Frances Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990) 45–65, for a helpful exploration of reading with the rule of faith as a presupposition.



part of the ancient fabric of Christian biblical interpretation. Soon after Christianity emerged from Judaism different schools of biblical interpretation emerged. Much has been made of the Alexandrian School's supposed preference for allegorical/figural interpretation over and against the Antiochene School's favouring of the literal interpretation. Though there is some truth in this distinction, the hermeneutical choices are more complex than this and both schools have elements of literal, moral, doctrinal, and figural interpretation.<sup>41</sup> The question of biblical interpretive legitimacy is complex, but surely, we must be committed to multiple, yet mutually coherent, readings.

We have seen that historical critical interpretation took the psalter and fragmented it, with the goal of getting either back to the original ideal psalms, or the situations in life that gave rise to them. In this sense rather than reading the psalter we have a process of reading something behind or before it. Such approaches are, of course, legitimate from a singular scholarly perspective. It is in this context that dissection can lead to new insights about ancient culture, the evolution of literature and language, and the history of religion, but as Hans Urs von Balthasar famously pointed out, in his criticism of the excesses of historical criticism: 'Anatomy can be practiced only on a dead body'.<sup>42</sup> While both form criticism and cult criticism can provide valuable insights they cannot be privileged when reading the psalter as scripture. The canonical approach, on the other hand, can be coherent with a stance of faith. This is because at its very heart it is concerned with the whole, rather than the parts, and how the whole was generated from a purposeful, i.e., a community faith-based process. In this way, a canonical approach legitimises a Davidic reading of the psalter.

As the canonical approach to the psalter has developed various interpreters have discerned a storyline within the fivefold structure of the psalter. Table 1 summarises three such proposals. The first proposal shown in the table is from Gerald Wilson.<sup>43</sup> As can be seen

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, *passim*.

<sup>42</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. I: Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983) 31–32.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson, *Psalter*, 199–228.

he sees the shape of the psalter as centred on the failure of the Davidic line. Though other scholars who follow the textual support for an overarching narrative have tended to make more of the positive nature of Book V in terms of post-exilic restoration and/or eschatological expectation. In Table 1 deClaissé-Walford's proposal is shown and can be seen to be essentially a more fully worked-out narrative that generally coheres with Wilson's.<sup>44</sup> The final column of Table 1 shows an example of structure expressed in explicitly theological terms by Robertson.<sup>45</sup> All three interpreters honour Balthasar's warning and look to the whole of the psalter and its form. In this way all three read the whole book Davidically, but Robertson goes further and reads it Christologically. What is interesting is that they have all embraced a new critical method and relocated the psalter under a Davidic lens. In this way they achieve what earlier critical methods ignored—a recognition of the importance of David. In this way they cohere with pre-critical approaches that read the psalter Davidically and Christologically.

The step that Robertson makes, a Christological reading, is made possible only from a stance of faith, i.e., using a prior rule of faith. Such a theological reading is appropriate given the growing recognition that the hegemony of critical approaches has been broken, as interpreters 'of faith' have been bold enough to deny the hermeneutical mantra that the Bible must be read only like other literature. A church reading using the rule of faith can identify the future David as Jesus Christ. Reading with the rule of faith quickens the text.

Some caution regarding canonical criticism is needed. Like all critical methods, and by its very nature, it relies on proposing and defending new proposals and hypotheses. Over time new critical methods tend to become increasingly all encompassing. It is vital that the ongoing value

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<sup>44</sup> Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 21–38.

<sup>45</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg: R&R Publishing, 2015).

of earlier critical methods is not lost, and that the limits of critical methods for use of the Bible as scripture is not forgotten.

**Table 1.** Three proposals regarding the narrative behind the five books of the psalter.

| <b>Books</b>                        | <b>Gerald Wilson<br/>(1985)</b>  | <b>deClaissé-<br/>Walford <i>et al.</i><br/>(2014)</b>                       | <b>O. Palmer<br/>Robertson<br/>(2015)</b> |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| <b>I</b><br>(Psalms<br>1–41)        | David’s<br>monarchy  | A chronicle of<br>the reigns of<br>David and<br>Solomon                      | Confrontation                             |
| <b>II</b><br>(Psalms<br>42–72)      |  |  | Communication                             |
| <b>III</b><br>(Psalms<br>73–89)     | The failure of<br>the Davidic<br>monarchy with<br>David’s<br>descendants | The story of the<br>divided<br>kingdoms and<br>their destruction             | Devastation                               |
| <b>IV</b><br>(Psalms<br>90–106)     | Yahweh, rather<br>than David,<br>reigns                                  | The Babylonian<br>Exile and the<br>evolution of the<br>community of<br>faith | Maturation                                |
| <b>V</b><br>(Psalms<br>107–<br>150) |  | A celebration of<br>the community<br>of faith’s<br>restoration               | Consummation                              |

Our examination of the psalter thus far has considered a variety of hermeneutical perspectives, each with their respective strengths and weaknesses. In summary:

1. There are those methods that privilege academic neutrality—which must put aside faith—these methods such as form criticism and cult criticism can transform our understanding of the psalms cognitively as new scientific understanding of

social setting, religious literature, and religion is hypothesised.<sup>46</sup> The premise of neutrality, however, risks undermining the very nature of psalms as the psalmists, editors of the psalter, the modern Christian reader and the church have an *a priori* commitment to the one who inspired the psalms. Nevertheless, appreciating that the psalms have a real past in personal devotion and gathered worship provides valuable insight into their recovery for today.

2. The recent canonical approach recognises the theological purpose of the psalter's redactors, which among other things made the psalter thoroughly Davidic. While such an approach could be conducted with scientific neutrality, this has not typically been the case. When adopted by scholars with Christian faith this approach offers a paradigm that can be termed theological interpretation. This approach can function as a helpful bridge between 1 (above) and 3 (below).
3. Since the writing of the New Testament there have been interpretive methods for reading the psalms that privilege Christian faith. These approaches were later developed and championed by the likes of Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin expect to find Christ in the psalter. Such approaches expect the possibility of the transformation of the reader's character and moral vision. They can, however, be problematic as there are limited controls on interpretation. Nevertheless, a nuanced appreciation of Davidic nature of the psalter, and its theologies of cross and glory, enable an understanding of the parallels between (i) the David of history to the human Jesus of Nazareth, and (ii) the David of faith to the glorified Christ.

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<sup>46</sup> This is not to say that they cannot inform faithful use of the psalms that might have further transformational potential, but rather that that such a move must be a distinct exercise requiring new presuppositions.

## 5. Conclusions

The above discussion enables some conclusions to be drawn. A number of these are not specifically Baptist in nature and this is neither a surprise nor undesirable:<sup>47</sup>

- The biblical psalms seem to have been eclipsed in worship by contemporary Christian music. Both are readily emotionally assimilated, but the psalms provide a richer emotional and theological framework.
- Reading the psalms should be a rich practice freed from the anachronism of quiet individualistic reading. The psalms should be celebrated in a variety of ways in gathered worship.
- Critical methods can offer insight into how the psalms can be used imaginatively and creatively.
- Critical methods need to be used with caution to avoid hypothetical reconstructions that detract from the psalms functioning as a means of grace.
- The canonical method invites connections with the otherwise pre-critical notion of the psalms as Davidic. Reading with a lens where David, or Christ, is the psalmist is coherent with this approach.
- The canonical method's understanding of the complex role for collecting and editing the psalms coheres with the Baptist notion of a regenerate community of faith.
- The suffering psalmist understood as both David and Christ provides a rich theological trajectory for the relationship between the testaments, as well as being profoundly instructive about the life of faith. This is a variation on Robinson's insights about the prophetic books.
- Hermeneutical engagement with the psalms is necessarily a process requiring multiple lenses. This is not at odds with the Baptist notion of the Bible being plainly revealed, as the rich

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<sup>47</sup> See Colwell, 'The Word of His Grace', 191 for a sensible path through wider hermeneutics and a caution regarding a distinct Baptist interpretive approach.

tapestry of interpretation concerns the transformative nature of the psalms rather than an explanation of salvation.

The final word will go to Bonhoeffer who, though clearly not a Baptist, shares the Baptist sensibility for the vital role of the community as the place for reading scripture. In this way reading the psalter becomes prayer:

Who prays the Psalms? David (Solomon, Asaph, etc.) prays, Christ prays, we pray. We—that is, first of all the entire community in which alone the vast richness of the Psalter can be prayed, but also finally every individual insofar as he participates in Christ and his community and prays their prayer. David, Christ, the church, I myself, and wherever we consider all of this together we recognise the wonderful way in which God teaches us to pray.<sup>48</sup>

### **Notes on Contributor**

Mark is a member of QE Park Baptist Church, Guildford where he is also a lay preacher.

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<sup>48</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970), 21.