THE IDENTITY OF ISRAEL'S GOD IN CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

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Essays in Honor of Christopher R. Seitz

Contents

On Difficulty and Psalm 2

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In his classic essay "On Difficulty," George Steiner outlines a taxonomy of difficulty in poetry. He characterizes four main types: readers can face contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological difficulties. The *contingent* may be interminable in practice, but it can, in theory, be resolved. It is ultimately a matter of homework, of looking things up. The *modal* has to do with an experience of alienation from a work, and it cannot be overcome simply with reference to the right dictionary or handbook. Some aspect of a piece's tone or mode or subject matter makes it illicit or repellent to readers in a different time and place. The *tactical* pushes readers beyond the conventions of sense-making—spelling and grammar and syntax and so on—for some deliberate purpose. The strategy might serve in what Martin Amis calls the war against cliché, or it could be part of a design to obstruct and unsettle. These first three kinds of difficulty are, according to Steiner, part of the standard contract between authors and readers. "Contingent difficulties aim to be looked up; modal difficulties challenge the inevitable parochialism of honest empathy; tactical difficulties endeavor to deepen our apprehension by dislocating and goading to new life the supine energies of word and grammar."[1] The fourth risks a breach of contract. The *ontological* pertains especially to the radical work of some modern poets, such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Celan, who "express their sense of the inauthentic situation of man in an environment of eroded speech."[2] While the first three categories reflect an array of established poetics, the last one

1. George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 40.

2. Steiner, *On Difficulty*, 44. "At certain levels," Steiner writes, "we are not meant to understand at all, and our interpretation, indeed our reading itself, is an intrusion (Celan himself often expressed a sense of violation in respect of the exegetic industry

appears to break with literary tradition. In that sense the development is distinctly modern.

Although ancient, Ps 2 presents a full array of difficulty as well. In what follows I will argue that all four of Steiner's categories apply to it, though in one case the sense of his term needs adjustment and in another redefinition. That the psalm has contingent and modal difficulties is uncontroversial. Stemming from the facts of its antique origins and continuous use in first Jewish and then Christian tradition, however, the psalm brings with it challenges that set it apart from Western poetry after the Renaissance. It belongs to a Psalter that defies analogy with any Norton anthology. That Psalter in turn belongs to the Scriptures of Israel, which are variously treasured and read as Tanak or Old Testament.[3] For literary, historical, and theological reasons the Bible does not read like any other book. There is less controversy than there used to be, in critical studies of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, about the notion that the position of Ps 2 behind Ps 1 gives it a special function as part of the entryway to the canonical book of Psalms. The point is still occasionally disputed.[4] My argument will be that the psalm's placement is tactical, more or less in Steiner's sense of the word, with major consequences for its interpretation. Finally, as part of Jewish and Christian Scripture, Ps 2 poses acute ontological questions. Here it is not that the psalmist threatens to break with literary tradition; rather, the psalm itself seems to threaten to break those who refuse its authority. It is, to echo Phyllis Trible, a text of terror. As such it forces readers to consider the power and nature of the Lord it names. Within Christian Scripture, too, it speaks of a begotten son whose profile is hazy, but whom the New Testament identifies with Jesus Christ. How should this later extension of scriptural sense be understood? Taken

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which began to gather around his poems). But again we ask: For whom, then, is the poet writing, let alone publishing?" (45).

3. In view of the "consumerist connotations" of Old Testament in English, the phrase "Elder Testament" (*l'Ancien Testament*) has recently been proposed as a reminder of historic Christian respect for a witness that is "venerable, original, and time-tested" (Christopher R. Seitz, *The Elder Testament: Canon, Theology, Trinity* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018], 13–19).

4. David Wilgren, "Why Psalms 1–2 Are Not to Be Considered a Preface to the 'Book' of Psalms," *ZAW* 130 (2018): 384–97, does not manage to dismantle the current consensus. His brief argument relies on fragmentary evidence (4Q174) and is constructed so narrowly as to deny even the slightest extension of the putative original sense.

together these factors make the interpretation of this psalm especially fraught. What the situation requires, among other things, is hermeneutical dexterity: Ps 2 needs to be read at multiple levels.

Text and Translation

To take a well-known example of the contingent variety, how should one understand the phrase נשקו בר in Ps 2:12, which the King James Version renders as "Kiss the Son"? Look up בר in the standard Hebrew lexicons, and you will find that most allow for the word here to be the Aramaic equivalent of בן, which appears in 2:7—although none advise rendering both in English as "Son" with a capital S. Some contemporary scholars, including David Clines and Susan Gillingham, have been content to leave the phrase as "Kiss the son," which is roughly how the Masoretic Text vocalizes it. Then again, why is בר indefinite? And why should the psalmist switch to Aramaic for a common word that has just been used in Hebrew? Faced with several elaborate reconstructions of the phrase, Robert Alter makes the simplest emendation possible by repointing בַּר as בֹּר. By pairing this change with an obscure but possible meaning of נשקו, he offers, "with purity be armed."[5] Ancient versions respond to the problem in their own ways. The Septuagint has δράξασθε παιδείας ("seize on instruction"), which multiple Latin editions mirror with *adprehendite disciplinam*. These translations might reflect a Hebrew *Vorlage* that has since been lost to history; however, there is a case to be made that Jerome's first and second translations of the Psalter either defer to the Old Latin or else reflect his general loyalty to the Greek text, which may in turn have been driven by its own tendency in the case at hand.[6] The Gallican Psalter (*Psalmorum iuxta Septuaginta emendatus*) gave "accept instruction" to the Latin church for centuries to come, although Jerome's third and final translation (*Psalmorum iuxta Hebraicum translatus*) reads *adorate pure* ("worship purity"), which is not far from Alter's solution. The Aramaic Targum, oddly enough, has קבילו אולפנא ("accept instruction"), which rather seems to agree with the Septuagint and the Vulgate. If its authors wondered what to do with

5. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), 7.

6. For an account of issues in Old Greek and Latin translations of Ps 2 see Susan Gillingham, *A Journey of Two Psalms: The Reception of Psalms 1 and 2 in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23–31, 61–66.

נשקו בר, then they evidently did not recognize בר as an Aramaic word. This choice, too, though, fits with the expansive tendency of Targum Psalms to emphasize law and instruction (torah, in a word).[7]

When Erasmus of Rotterdam takes stock of the situation in 1522, he arrives at a combination of two major possibilities. He rehearses Jerome's account of the textual details, and then, in a move that might well be inspired by Jerome's habit of drawing a surplus of spiritual and polemical meaning out of anything extant, paraphrases 2:12a as follows: "Those who attribute salvation to man's own works do not worship the Son in purity [*pure adorant Filium*]."[8] It is a clever result, but it refuses the *crux interpretum* and must, in the end, be judged too ingenious. Erasmus also appears to surrender his ambition to master the Hebrew truth. It is precisely here, in a discussion of what *bar* means in Syriac and Hebrew, where he gives in, saying that "there is no need to cudgel our brains with the complexities of these barbaric languages!"[9] Thus his exposition is not derailed.

In terms of a reconstruction, still today one might wish to capitulate. For all the homework one can do on Ps 2:12aα, the difficulty remains intractable. No fully satisfactory solution has ever emerged. It is possible, at least in theory, that the desired information could still be found. Then again, as has recently been argued, maybe the doubtful phrase is a late gloss, in which case there can be no more original form of it to uncover.[10] Has the question reached an impasse? Stubborn contingent difficulties still want a resolution. Erasmus understands the basic problem in Ps 2:12 about as well as anyone who has ever looked into the matter, and although his exposition falls short of a solution, he understands something else as well, something that is implicit in many of the versions he considers: if a

7. David M. Stec, *The Targum of Psalms: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes*, ArBib 16 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 4–5. See also Gillingham, *Journey of Two Psalms*, 70–76.

8. PL 26:875d–876a. Desiderius Erasmus, *Expositions of the Psalms,* trans. Michael J. Heath, Collected Works of Erasmus 63 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 142; Erasmus, *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi* Roterodami (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1985), 5.2:154 line 841. Commentary on Ps 2 runs to sixty-three pages in the Latin edition, and seventy-six pages in English translation.

9. Erasmus, *Expositions*, 142. See the discussion in Allan K. Jenkins, "Erasmus' Commentary on Psalm 2," *JHebS* 3 (2001), 1.5, 3.6, 5.2–5; https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2000.v3.a3.

10. So Sam Janse, *"You are My Son": The Reception History of Psalm 2 in Early Judaism and the Early Church,* CBET 51 (Leuven: Peeters, 2009).

verse is meant for religious instruction and edification, if, in other words, one is dealing with Scripture in the context of its use by the people of God, then one has a further reason to seek an intelligible resolution. The Bible is no locus of eroded speech and can be declared corrupt only as a last resort, if at all. Better to see textual difficulty as an occasion to open up Scripture's extended sense. In allegorical reading especially, and sometimes in textual criticism, too, Jerome and Erasmus deploy the same additive strategy found in many ancient versions.

In contrast, my own preliminary translation of Ps 2 (below) is governed by limiting principles. First, I restrict myself to a single sense for each word or phrase, at least in the first instance. I aim to give the plain sense of it, though I recognize that this can be difficult or impossible to establish in cases like 2:12a. Second, I try to reproduce the terse parallel cadences of the Hebrew.[11] Third, wherever possible, I avoid making nouns definite when no article appears in the Hebrew original, and vice versa. A curious feature of the history of the Psalter's translation is how seemingly crucial definite articles are inserted or removed. Already in Ps 1:1, for example, the Septuagint appears to read אשרי האיש ("Happy the man") as anarthrous (and, with ἀνήρ, rather more specifically male). Conversely, in English translation Ps 2 meets with a surfeit of definiteness. Some of these changes may be appropriate. Different languages call for articles in different measure. However, additions of "the" do shift the meaning of Ps 2 in English, and they begin to look automatic. A surprising number of technical translations and commentaries take their presence for granted. Fourth, in a related move the word ארץ is construed as "land" instead of "earth." Both meanings are possible. Again, though, few commentators give credence to the more local, less global reading.[12] Lastly, I ignore the fact that Ps 2 is embedded in a singular collection of psalms, adjacent to Ps 1 and ahead of a long series of psalms that, unlike it, have superscrip-

11. Strikingly, for all his limitations as a Christian Hebraist, Erasmus anticipates Robert Lowth's discovery of parallelism in Hebrew poetry (Jenkins, "Erasmus' Psalm 2," 3.4).

12. Exceptions include T. K. Cheyne, *The Book of Psalms: Translated from a Revised Text with Notes and Introduction* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1904); Isaiah Sonne, "The Second Psalm," *HUCA* 19 (1945): 43–55. See David J. A. Clines, "Psalm 2 and the MLF (Moabite Liberation Front)," in *The Bible in Human Society: Essays in Honour of John Rogerson*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R., David J. A. Clines, and Philip R. Davies, JSOTSup 200 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 167.

tions.[13] In the end I will argue that its position at the front of the Psalter has significance, as a kind of tactical extension, but it is also possible and useful to imagine the text shorn of that context.

1 Why do nations agitate, and peoples grumble emptily?
2 Kings of the realm take their stand, and princes form an alliance,
against the LORD and against his anointed.
3 "Let us snap their fetters and shake ourselves free from their ropes."
4 He who sits in heaven laughs. The Lord snorts at them.
5 Then he speaks to them in his anger, and his rage terrifies them.
6 "I have consecrated my king on Zion, my holy hill."
7 I will recount the LORD's decree. He said to me,
"You are my son. I myself have begotten you today.
8 Ask of me, and I will give nations as your inheritance,
the borderland as your territory.
9 You shall break them with an iron scepter,
shattering them like a potter's jar."
10 And now, O kings, be wise. Take instruction, rulers of the land.
11 Be subject to the LORD in fear: be glad to tremble.
12 Kiss an heir lest he fume, and you destroy yourself
because his temper runs short.
Happy they who flee to him.

Later I will present a revised translation of Ps 2 together with Ps 1, its nearest canonical neighbor.[14] First, though, a more immediate difficulty must be considered.

Modal Affront

Nobody has given a better account of the modal difficulty of Ps 2 than Clines. Applying a hermeneutic of suspicion, he adopts the point of view

13. Except for Pss 10 and 33, all other psalms in book 1 of the MT Psalter have superscriptions. The LXX has no exceptions since Pss 9 and 10 are combined and Ps 33 (LXX 32) supplies the lack.

14. A careful intertextual study of Pss 1–3 nevertheless calls Ps 1–2 a "diptych": Beat Weber, "'HERR, wie viele sind geworden meine Bedränger…' (Ps 3,2a): Psalm 1–3 als Ouvertüre des Psalters unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Psalm 3 und seinem Präskript," in *Der Bibelkanon in der Bibelauslegung: Methodenreflexionen und Beispielexegesen*, ed. Egbert Ballhorn and Georg Steins (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 239.

of "the position that is systematically repressed both within the text and within scholarly tradition."[15] Dignifying this perspective with a name, he calls the anonymous enemies of the psalm Moabite and then makes himself an advocate for both a "Moabite Liberation Front," which he imagines to be hidden in the world of the text, and a "readers' liberation movement," which he calls for in the scholarly guild that almost invariably betrays "a complicity with the text."[16] The value judgments that fill his essay are instructive.

For Clines the text of Ps 2 is polemical, propagandistic, "unmistakably and smugly typical of an insensitive imperial despotism," amoral, perverse in its appropriation of religious language for crass political ends, scornful, vengeful, repressive, ethnocentric, tyrannical, violent, and illegitimate.[17] "What is so bad for me about Psalm 2's ideology is … not only that I do not approve of it but that it cannot sustain itself or justify itself in terms of Israel's own self-awareness. And that is the ethical problem the text itself raises: the text is an act of bad faith."[18] The scholarly tradition, too, is "myopic" (blind "to the 'Moabite' point of view"), prone to "moralizing or theologizing," susceptible to "universalizing" and "idealizing" tendencies, guilty of "softening the contours" by playing down "some remarkably astringent elements," often with a Christianizing rhetoric of love, and, in some of the more pernicious cases, fully aligned "with the savagery of the psalm," which interpreters use to promote their "totalitarian instincts" and jingoism.[19] Clines recognizes that his own response to text and interpretation is culturally conditioned by his experience as a British man living in a postcolonial and post-Christian era, but he also owns it.[20] Readers, he concludes, must be "free from the authority of the text and of its professional interpreters":

> It is a sad day for theism if the only language its adherents can find to express their sense of the divine is the language of oriental despotism,

15. Clines, "Psalm 2," 159.

16. Clines, "Psalm 2," 184. "Like the freedom fighters of the Moabite Liberation Front, [modern readers] have nothing to lose but their chains, but unlike them they do not even need to unite to find their freedom—everyone can do it for themselves."

17. Clines, "Psalm 2," 161.

18. Clines, "Psalm 2," 180. His point is that it is inconsistent for a formerly liberated Israel to aspire to become the oppressor, even if Ps 2 is merely the wishful projection of a marginalized community.

19. Clines, "Psalm 2," 162, 165, 166, 168, 169, 172, 173–75.

20. Clines, "Psalm 2," 180.

> with its scornful deity who offers comfort to petty kings in their grandiose ambitions and authorizes state violence and a regime of terror against those who want nothing more gross than self-determination.[21]

He feels compelled to break the chain of authority as an act of political solidarity with those across the ages who have been oppressed by the same. Thus, in Steiner's language, the poem's argument has become illicit and repellent for a different audience.

Clines styles himself a renegade. If it was so in 1995, his position has since acquired an orthodoxy of its own. It is not often found in more technical literature, such as John Collins's investigation of the extent to which Ps 2 attaches to messianic understanding in Second Temple Judaism.[22] However, the case is different in Collins's widely used *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. David's kingdom, students are told, was a mere dot on a map. The Bible's account of God's promises to David are shaped by the royal ideology of Judah, as may be found in places like 2 Sam 7 and Pss 2, 45, 72, and 110:

> What is striking in Ps 2 is the kind of authority the king is supposed to enjoy: the nations are his inheritance and the ends of the earth are his possession. No king in Jerusalem ever actually reigned over such an empire, even bearing in mind that the world known to the psalmist was smaller than ours. Of course, the claim is deliberately hyperbolic, but it shows that the Jerusalem monarchy had delusions of grandeur.[23]

Psalm 2 comes up repeatedly in this connection, illustrating the presence of "political propaganda."[24] This unflattering feature helps show why the Psalter is subject to ethical critique. "The book of Psalms is not a book of moral instruction." The simple fact that it has been used that way for millennia does not mean that its contents are "edifying or that they can serve as moral guidelines."[25] In this example, the religiohistorical assessment of

21. Clines, "Psalm 2," 185.

22. John J. Collins, "The Interpretation of Psalm 2," in *Scriptures and Sectarianism: Essays on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, WUNT 332 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 87–101. Evidence for messianic understanding at this time is, he finds, "widespread" (101).

23. John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 236.

24. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 477.

25. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 480.

Hermann Gunkel has been combined with the open ethical critique of Clines.[26] Further, Collins is representative. For an increasing number of people, the modal dimension of this psalm provokes a feeling of revulsion that leads to its rejection. At present it can appear as if the text sets a snare for modern readers, many of whom respond by asserting their moral right to shake themselves free from its cords.

Natural as it is, gut-level reaction against the psalm tends, when embraced, to block sympathy for whatever instinct felt it to be worth preserving, collecting, and transmitting as Scripture in the first place. There are multiple reasons why some scholars, faced with an outpouring of constructive research on the shape and shaping of the Psalter, demur. In some cases, it is simply because an older paradigm prevails. One cannot insist on a strict form-critical handling of the royal enthronement psalms without devaluing their present distribution in the Psalter. There is a certain incompatibility of methods. In other cases, evidence of inner-biblical echoes and allusions is pressed too far, straining credulity. Samuel Sandmel's parallelomania abides. In still others, the new line of research seems unacceptable precisely because it serves to blunt the edge of Ps 2's modal affront. The closing word of blessing, which is rarely ever eliminated on literary grounds, is trivialized because it is judged a sham. Surely it is no coincidence that Clines and Collins are among those who dismiss current trends—and ancient ones, as will be seen—that allow the prospective final happiness of "all" (2:12c) to recontextualize the more troubling language of Ps 2.

Tactical Extension

Steiner's tactical difficulty pertains to a poetic strategy that pushes careful readers to stop and reconsider the meaning of a word or phrase. Its use in modern poetry may be to "obstruct and unsettle," but the relocation of sense through dislocation can also be constructive. Most biblical scholars now agree that the Psalter provides many fine examples of the tactical extension of sense in ancient verse, especially through a network of secondary intertextual connections that arise through editorial shaping and strategic positioning in a canonical anthology. Even though the editorial objective in the book of Psalms is to guide rather than to block the reader,

26. Gunkel's view is summarized by Janse, *My Son*, 26: "Removed from all sense of reality, Israel's court poets imitated the court poetry of the great Egyptian and Mesopotamian empires to flatter their king."

the tactical remains difficult because it introduces an additional layer of meaning without erasing aspects of a more original sense. Standing in signal position at the front of a collection of one hundred fifty psalms arranged in five books, Ps 2 is a case in point.

There are those who reject the significance of canonical shaping for the interpretation of the Bible's psalms. For Gunkel it was a methodological axiom. Working in a later day, when discussion of the shaping of the Psalter was still somewhat novel, Clines has the benefit of knowing Erich Zenger's characterization of Pss 1–2 as a prelude to the book of Psalms. He does not give the argument its due, however, because of his driving interest to show how the prominent "position of [Ps 2] makes the ethical problem it raises only more acute."[27] Discussion of several decades, in major journals, monographs, and commentaries, makes the new paradigm hard to dismiss today. Nancy deClaissé-Walford's *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (2014) provides a convenient snapshot of the state of the question.[28] Most contributors to her volume regard Gerald Wilson's *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (1985) as a watershed.[29] Erhard Gerstenberger is something of an outlier in the group thanks to his focus on hymnic speech forms in a comparative ancient Near Eastern framework, which consciously follows the tradition of Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel.[30] The older approach still yields insight, but in the current scholarly environment it is surprising to hear nothing about the Psalter as such. Also, the newer discussion in Europe, particularly in German literature, has placed more emphasis on the history of the anthology's formation (the shaping), in contrast to the focus on literary contours (the shape) that dominates in Anglo-American literature. Still, Rolf Jacobson has ample reason to say that canonical criticism of the psalms, as practiced by scholars like Wilson and Zenger, "has shown convincingly that there is an intentional canonical shape to the Psalter."[31] There are edge cases, but Ps 2 is not among them. It

27. Clines, "Psalm 2," 182.

28. Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship*, AIL 20 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

29. Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

30. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "The Dynamic of Praise in the Ancient Near East, or Poetry and Politics," in deClaissé-Walford, *Shape and Shaping*, 27–39.

31. Rolf A. Jacobson, "Imagining the Future of Psalms Studies," in deClaissé-Walford, *Shape and Shaping*, 234.

is discussed by at least six of deClaissé-Walford's contributors (more than a third), including one who develops an account of substantial editorial links between Pss 2 and 149.[32]

Just how new is this new approach to the psalms? Its modern form owes a debt to Brevard Childs, among others, and Wilson acknowledges more than the lone article on psalm titles that is customarily cited.[33] He is not breaking up untilled ground. Yet some have asked if contemporary assumptions about how the Bible ought to be read, supposedly, are not belied by a lack of regard for canonical contours in ancient readings of the psalms. In the Psalter's vast history of reception, in its various forms, it certainly would be a problem if no one had ever paid attention to the arrangement of psalms until 1970. Jacobson expresses his uncertainty on this point in 2014:

> It seems to me that it is time to integrate and test what we know about how the communities were actually reading the psalms with theories about what the final form "means." Are there any congruencies or incongruences between how the New Testament, Qumran, and other first-century Jewish communities were actually interpreting the psalms and the canonical theories about what the Psalter's final form means? Were any of these readers who were approaching the Psalter as a "book" and interpreting in the psalms with anything like what we call "plot" or "characterization"? What theological questions did they seem to be bringing to the Psalter? Are these the same questions that canonical criticism has posited that narrative interpreters of the psalms should bring?[34]

Happily, by 2013 Gilllingham had already developed a robust answer to such questions, worked out in a major case study of Pss 1–2. Do the ancients have a feel for the Psalter's opening editorial framework? Her conclusion is: it depends. Sometimes early Jewish or Christian tradition senses a connection between Pss 1 and 2 or between that portal to the

32. Derek E. Wittman, "Let Us Cast Off Their Ropes from Us: The Editorial Significance of the Portrayal of Foreign Nations in Psalms 2 and 149," in deClaissé-Walford, *Shape and Shaping*, 53–69.

33. Brevard S. Childs, "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis," *JSS* 16 (1971): 137–50; Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. Note the dedication to Wilson's last teacher, Childs, "who taught me to respect the Canon."

34. Jacobson, "Future," 237.

Psalter and the psalms that follow. Sometimes it does not.[35] But a kind of appreciation for the Psalter's canonical shape clearly does exist in antiquity. On occasion it sounds out with clarity.

Gregory of Nyssa furnishes a superb example of the extent to which ancient and modern approaches can converge. From his study of the inscriptions of the psalms, which is informed by his knowledge of classical rhetoric, Gregory learns that the aim (σκοπός) of the Psalter is beatitude. This blessed state is realized as human creatures are brought into the praise of God. The whole book of Psalms facilitates that end: "The entire treatise of the Psalms has been separated into five sections, and there is a systematic arrangement and division in these sections. The circumscription of the sections is obvious, since they conclude in a similar manner with certain ascriptions of praise to God."[36]

Gregory observes that all five sections conclude with refrains of praise. Further, the beginning of the Psalter opens up the way to spiritual transformation. How does it come about that "every breathing creature" can, in the end, "praise the Lord" (Ps 150:6)? It starts with Ps 1. "The first entrance to the good, therefore, is the departure from those things which are opposed to it. The participation in what is superior occurs by means of this entrance."[37] Again, the Psalter "opened a door … to the blessed life in its first words in respect to the withdrawal from evil. For the first words of the Psalter teach this," and "the meaning of the last psalm" confirms its proper goal (τέλος).[38] In describing the broad parameters established by Pss 1 and 150, Gregory anticipates papers that have

35. Gillingham, *Journey of Two Psalms*. Her book's first goal is to show how "a focus on *reception history* can provide a wider perspective in testing, correcting, and adding to [recent] debates" about whether Pss 1 and 2 function together or separately (1, emphasis original). She adjudicates this issue in ancient Judaism (mostly separate: 36–37), early Christianity (increasingly together: 66–67), rabbinic and medieval Judaism (mostly together: 92–94), the early Middle Ages and the Reformation period (together but waning: 127–29), and on down through current debate. Reception historical study, she notes, "has the advantage of interacting with a full and often complex interpretative tradition, which literary critics and biblical theologians often fail to take into account" (1).

36. Ronald E. Heine, *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms: Introduction, Translation, and Notes,* OECS (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 95.

37. Heine, *Treatise on the Inscriptions*, 96.

38. Heine, *Treatise on the Inscriptions*, 122, cf. 15, 29–30, 52–53.

lately been given in the book of Psalms section at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

Having established the Psalter's scope in part 1 of his treatise, Gregory turns to the question of its inscriptions in part 2. Two interpretive moves are of interest at present. First, he illustrates the path to blessed praise through a sequential treatment of the first eleven psalms, which he finds to have a deliberate and productive flow (ἀκολουθία). Although he does not carry the exercise any further, he has a vocabulary that speaks to purposeful arrangement (τάξις) in the psalms. Some psalms appear in the wrong historical sequence, but only because they show the proper spiritual order:

> So the psalms have been formed like a sculptor's tools for the true overseer who, like a craftsman, is carving our souls into the divine likeness…. For example, the first psalm removed humanity from its cohesion with evil. The second, having indicated the appearance of the Lord through the flesh in advance, showed to what we should cling, and that to *trust in him* is *blessed* [Ps 2:12]. The third predicts the temptation which rises up against you from the enemy, so that as soon as you have been anointed into the kingdom through faith, and rule with the true Christ, he attempts to cast you out of your honored position, having come not from without, but from you yourself.[39]

In this way Ps 2 is framed with canonical reference points, including, along with the incarnate Christ made known in the New Testament, the Psalter's own guiding index of beatitude. Gregory pursues a canonically ordered reading strategy. Second, by conceiving of the five books of psalms as five stages in the spiritual ascent to God, he leaves himself room to make finer distinctions about the Psalter's shape and purpose. For example, at the head of book 4, Ps 90 (LXX 89) is the one and only prayer of Moses. The title provides him an occasion to reflect on that saint's virtuous example (cf. his *Life of Moses*). Or again, Pss 1 and 2 are the only two psalms that he allows to stand without a superscription.[40] In fact he concludes that "the first Psalm is an inscription of the second," which draws Ps 2 further into the orbit of the end of the Psalter and its first book.[41] Psalm 41:14 (LXX

39. Heine, *Treatise on the Inscriptions*, 165.

40. The LXX includes fourteen psalm titles beyond what is known in the MT. Gregory appears to reckon with twelve. See the analysis in Heine, *Treatise on the Inscriptions*, 17–18.

41. Heine, *Treatise on the Inscriptions*, 144.

40) sounds a note of blessing at the end of book 1. This detail allows him to connect "the repetition of the pronouncement of blessedness" there to the opening benedictions, which it redefines. "For the first psalms"—note the plural—"to depart from evil was blessed, but here to know the good more fully is pronounced blessed."[42] The anointed king poised to smash his enemies with an iron scepter is now revealed in his truer nature as the only begotten one who emptied himself and became poor for our sake, taking on the form of a servant: "For in the opening words of the psalm the Word calls him *needy* and *poor* [LXX Ps 40:2]; at the end of the section he says, '*Blessed by the Lord God of Israel from eternity to eternity. So be it. So be it*' [LXX Ps 40:14]."[43] In other words, Gregory responds to subtle details of the Psalter's macrostructure and microstructure, as situated within a particular form of Christian Scripture. His idiom is not of plot or characterization, but he is well equipped with a stable of technical rhetorical terms like σκοπός, τέλος, ἀκολουθία, τάξις, and more.[44] One hardly needs to add that he achieves his result without access to Hebrew. Although the shape of the Psalter was not obvious to every ancient reader, its contours were sufficiently available to those with skill to study them.

For a modern reading equal to Gregory of Nyssa, one might look to Bernd Janowski's synthesis of the theological architecture of the Psalter. After considering classic metaphors from Athanasius, Augustine, Jerome, and Luther—typically the Psalter is conceived of as a kind of house or mirror in Christian tradition—he decides that the work is best described as "a temple of words." Like Gregory, he sees a framework of beatitude ("Seligpreisung") established by Pss 1–2; 40:5; 41:2; and 146–150.[45] In

42. Heine, *Treatise on the Inscriptions*, 170.

43. Heine, *Treatise on the Inscriptions*, 171, with references to John 1:18; 2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:7; and Ps 41 (indicated in Heine's italics). Gregory appears to see Ps 41:14 as an explicit for the Psalter's first book, since he distinguishes between "the opening words of the psalm" and "the end of the section." For a snapshot of Gregory's scheme, see Heine's outline of the "successive goods" delivered by each of the Psalter's five sections (68).

44. For essential context see Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). She sees not "allegory, but a sort of biblical theology emerging from a kind of figural allegory which permits the two Testaments to cohere" (263).

45. Bernd Janowski, "Ein Tempel aus Worten: Zur theologischen Architektur des Psalters," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, ed. Erich Zenger, BETL 238 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 284.

borrowed language he speaks of "a theological itinerary" set forth in book 1.[46] With considerably more precision than Gregory, thanks to modern research, he describes a network of concatenated themes that begin with blessing, torah, the righteous and the wicked, the way of life, and divine judgment. Together they set a course that tends to pull in an eschatological direction as it leads supplicants from lament to praise, from grave to temple, from David to Zion.[47] It culminates in the universal praise of God on Zion, voiced at the last in "every breath" (150:6). Thus the keystone of the Psalter (146–150) holds up and elevates initial glimpses of an individual's subvocal meditation "day and night" (1:2) and the rebel leaders who are exhorted to join "all who take refuge" in the Lord (2:12c).[48] The dual motifs of torah's yoke and God's king dilate across five books until they finally open up onto a "neue Skopos," which is "the universal kingship of YHWH, who as Savior of the poor executes the eschatological judgment (Ps 149:5–9) and thus brings the new heaven and the new earth (Ps 150)."[49] Here again the scope of the Psalter is salvation itself.

What effect does canonical context have on Ps 2? In antiquity and modernity people have understood its unique placement to entail a rereading of certain elements, such as the scale of the blessing held up to one (Pss 1:1, 41:2) and all (Pss 2:12, 150:6). It pushes the potentially local ("land") toward the universal ("earth"). At the same time, it seems to add a degree of concreteness, which might explain why so many translators add definite

46. Janowski, "Ein Tempel," 286, and passim. The phrase "ein theologisches Itinerar" is drawn from Gianni Barbiero, *Das erste Psalmenbuch als Einheit: Eine synchrone Analyse von Psalm 1–41*, ÖBS 16 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1999), 62.

47. This point about eschatology was made already by Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 516, who notes that Ps 2 "has been given an eschatological ring, both by its position in the Psalter and by the attachment of new meaning to the older vocabulary through the influence of the prophetic message (cf. Jer 23:5; Ezek 34:23)." Ancient translations recognized this tendency in their own way, as Joachim Schaper and others have seen. For a survey of the issues see Gillingham, *Journey of Two Psalms*, 23–31; Joachim Schaper, "The Septuagint Psalter," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 173–84.

48. Janowski, "Ein Tempel," 301–2.

49. Janowski, "Ein Tempel," 304: "die universale Königsherrschaft JHWHs, der als Retter der Armen das eschatologische Gericht durchführt (Ps 149,5–9) und damit den neuen Himmel und die neue Erde bringt (Ps 150)."

articles.[50] The kings of 2:2 are no longer obscure regional tyrants of the Levant but now stand as associates, if not indicted coconspirators, of the wicked ones whose bad counsel puts the devout figure of Ps 1 in relief. In its present context—as part of a doorway to a temple built not with stone but with words, opening onto a theological itinerary aimed at the blessing and goodness of God as revealed in the salvation of God's people—Ps 2 requires a different translation than the preliminary one I offered above. In its place I propose a more contextual translation of Pss 1 and 2 together.

1:1 Happy the one who does not walk under direction of the wicked,
or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of scoffers.
2 He delights instead in the law of the Lord,
murmuring in meditation on it day and night.
3 He is like a tree planted by headwaters,
giving its fruit in its season though its leaf does not fall:
in all that he does he flourishes.
4 The wicked are not so but are blown to the wind like chaff.
5 That is why the wicked will not stand under judgment
or sinners in company with the righteous.
6 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will be lost.
2:1 Why do nations agitate, and peoples *murmur* emptily?
2 *The* kings of the *earth* take their stand, and princes form an alliance,
against the Lord and against his anointed.
3 "Let us snap their fetters and shake ourselves free from their ropes."
4 He who sits in heaven laughs. The Lord snorts at them.
5 Then he speaks to them in his anger, and his rage terrifies them.
6 "I have consecrated my king on Zion, my holy hill."
7 I will recount the Lord's *statute*. He said to me,
"You are my son. I myself have begotten you today.
8 Ask of me, and I will give nations as your inheritance,
the *ends of the earth* as your territory.
9 You shall break them with an iron scepter,
shattering them like a potter's jar."
10 And now, O kings, be wise. Take instruction, rulers of the *earth*.
11 *Serve* the Lord *with* fear: be glad to tremble.
12 Kiss *the* heir lest he fume, and you *lose the way*
because his temper runs short.
Happy *all* who *trust in* him.

50. Janowski, "Ein Tempel," 283.

Revisions to the first version appear in italics. I have added "the" and "earth" in some places to reflect the Psalter's more universal arc. The word "heir" in 2:12a, which reflects a different underlying word for "son" in 2:7, is now "the heir" because, in context, it has rather less to do with Zerubbabel (perhaps, assuming the psalm is postexilic) and rather more with David (though David is first named only in Ps 3). If the difficult phrase is about a son, then it gestures toward the great king of God's anointing (2 Sam 7) and not some forgotten sub-Persian governor of Yehud (cf. Acts 4:25). But the phrase remains obscure. I have also allowed verbal resonances with Ps 1 to pull other words in new directions. For example, "statute" for חק in 2:7 pairs better with "law" for תורה in 1:2, "murmur" in 2:1 underscores the fact that the same verb is used in 1:2, and a few elements of terror are reconditioned by the adjacent posture of prayer ("trust in" instead of "flee to" in 2:12c). There is also the shared image of travel on paths.

Part of the tactical difficulty of this text is the need to hold multiple layers of meaning in tension. At minimum it has two valences. Psalm 2 functions at the level of an individual psalm; it also functions within the framework of the book of Psalms. Further potential layers of meaning are held at bay in my translation, in deference to what is traditionally called the plain sense or *sensus literalis* of Scripture. That is just one of the reasons I do not follow the ESV translation committee in restoring the KJV's "Kiss the Son" at verse 12. A question of christological reference persists, however. In a still broader canonical setting—namely, within Christian Scripture—is the plain sense of Ps 2 patient of further recontextualization?

Ontological Outlook

It has been said that "any explanation of the placement of psalms is speculative, and cannot bear much weight in an argument."[51] Adequate study of ancient and recent scholarship on Ps 2 reveals it to be, in fact, a stout counterexample. When a sense of its role in establishing canonical contours may be found in the history of its formation, in the history of its reception, and in recent biblical scholarship, then the case for finding a secondary layer of resonance in Ps 2 is strong indeed. Following an ancient tradition (Acts 13:33 var.; b. Ber. 9b–10a), some have even argued that the two were originally one psalm. Sam Janse's verdict is more likely:

51. Collins, "Psalm 2," 92.

> After weighing the arguments I think that there must be, in one way or another, a connection between these two psalms. The thematic agreements are not convincing, but the idiomatic correspondences are too strong to be incidental. The *inclusio*, too, that is formed by Ps 1:1 and 2:12, weighs heavily. It is also important that Jewish and Christian traditions show that even at an early stage Pss 1 and 2 were already seen as a unity.[52]

In whatever way it comes about, the present arrangement of the pair constitutes an introduction or entryway to the Psalter. Their unique placement leads to a more complex task of interpretation because the language of one psalm leans into the other, and both together place the meaning of subsequent psalms in new light. In short, to modify Steiner, the canonical situation of Ps 2 is tactical.

The book of Psalms is a rich field of association. Or, to borrow a phrase, it is an "achievement of association."[53] This is not less true because of the complex traditions represented by the Great Psalms Scroll (11Q5) and the Septuagint Psalter, among other ancient versions. These only add to the depth of meaning—as well as the contingent difficulty. And yet the Psalter also carries a freight of authority that, for a great many readers over the ages, raises a difficulty beyond those already described. If, as Gregory and Janowski see, the Psalter presents an itinerary for salvation, then a person's response to the modal difficulty of Ps 2 becomes still more fraught. It becomes existential. It is almost a question of conversion. Will we accept this difficult word or not? If so, on what terms? If no, why does it come to us in this overwhelming manner? Clines describes the predicament memorably:

> The text is an ocean liner (the S.S. Authority) bearing down on me out of the fog, me in my leaky dinghy trying to navigate the chartless sea of meaning. This text has been chanted by millions of the faithful over two

52. Janse, *My Son*, 32. He finds "it probable that as an overture Ps 1 chronologically preceded Ps 2 and was the starting point for the composition of the second psalm." Details of compositional history remain controversial. Quite a number of others, including Gillingham, still regard Ps 2 as the older psalm. I do not take a position on the issue here, even though my preliminary isolation of Ps 2 might seem to support the view that it shows traces of an older ritual use.

53. Christopher R. Seitz, *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets: The Achievement of Association in Canon Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

> millennia, subliminally supporting, *inter alia*, papal authority, the divine right of kings and the British empire too—and its force will not abate even if the institutions it supports may change from time to time.[54]

Various responses are possible, as we have seen. Erasmus seems to evade contingent and modal problems only to introduce another one by domesticating the text in the triumphal name of Christ. Collins seems to evade modal and ontological problems by making the psalm very small. Neither model is very satisfying. If, in the playground of interpretation, Erasmus represents the church's bad habit of stealing the ball from the synagogue, Collins embodies the late modern instinct to kick it over the fence so that nobody can play with it. Either way the full difficulty of Ps 2 has not been engaged.

Still other possibilities exist. For Christians who do not renounce Ps 2, what might a viable reading of it look like? If dialogue with the exegetical tradition is important, retreat to fourth century Antioch is no option. Even Diodore of Tarsus finds Christ there. What can the church now say about the identity of this "son," and how can it say it? With such questions in view, Christopher Seitz writes of "the capacity of the Psalter to allow a fusion of referents." What this means in the history of interpretation varies from Alexandria to Antioch, or across the expositions of Basil, Jerome, Augustine, Hilary, Aquinas, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, and so on. Seitz argues for a "family resemblance" in Christian tradition, however, since the fusion "happens in such a way that the particularity of each [referent] is not lost, but through extended sense-making, is capable of greater integration and theological achievement."[55] How might one discern this extended sense? In another place Seitz commends the early church's pursuit of the "mind" of Scripture (διάνοια). This mode of interpretation engages the plain sense of Scripture even as it operates at a different level than the literary theorist's arena of intertextual play:

> To speak of the mind of scripture will mean above all a grappling with the two-testament character of its presentation. The Bible is not a flat

54. Clines, "Psalm 2," 185, emphasis original.

55. Christopher R. Seitz, "Psalm 2 in the Entry Hall of the Psalter: Extended Sense in the History of Interpretation," in *Church, Society, and the Christian Common Good: Essays in Conversation with Philip Turner*, ed. Ephraim Radner (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 95.

> surface of associative potential precisely because the first part gets recycled in the second in a particular kind of way. What is said of David man and king is said again, and finally, of Christ. What is said of Sophia is said again of Christ. The challenge for Christian interpretation is figuring out, or figuring in, how that "saying again" amalgamates and enriches for a clear sense-making: clear because competent to be defended as truly given *ad litteram* and also competent to defeat alternative readings in public testimony.[56]

We have seen how Gregory of Nyssa speaks to the value of τάξις and ἀκολουθία in reading the Psalter. He is among those who know of Scripture's διάνοια as well, which may contribute to his realization that Christ is more truly revealed in Ps 41 than Ps 2. If Seitz is correct, rediscovering the church's search for the mind of Scripture could prove to have as much relevance as order and sequence do in Janowski's account of Israel's "temple of words." In ontological outlook, then, the challenge in the church is to understand the specific witness of Scripture in forms Old and New, allowing each part full scope, on its own terms, to address the divine subject matter. This monumental task has rightly been called a struggle. It is one reason why so many Christian theologians turn to the Psalter again and again over their lifetimes. It is why some of the best and most influential exegetes among them, including Augustine and Luther, show an ability to change their minds as they contend with what individual psalms truly deliver.

Of Ps 2 in particular I want to add that this last difficulty is productive, too, not only or even especially in literary terms. Literary movement from the blessed one (האיש) of Ps 1:1 to the happy company of "all [כל] who take refuge in him" in 2:12 is not always understood or appreciated. However, it does anticipate the intercessory work of one who is identified in the book of Psalms with God's man Moses (איש האלהים) in the pivotal Ps 90 and elsewhere with less definite figures of merciful beatitude (e.g. the אשרי אדם of Ps 84). Where the Psalter's theological itinerary finally leads is not judgment but a festival of praise—a profound event in Christian Scripture that would be almost unintelligible in the New Testament without the independent, antecedent witness of the Old. Yes, Ps 2 sounds a stern warning among the nations. It threatens their destruction. For this it has lately become a scandal. At the same time, it frames an imperative

56. Seitz, *Elder Testament*, 213–14.

directed at and open to *omnes gentes*. It invites an extra-Israelite response that is echoed in lament and praise until it peaks in a jubilant crescendo. "Let all [כל] that has breath praise the Lord. Hallelujah" (Ps 150:6). Traces of its ascending career may be heard in a refrain that is somehow still widely known and sung in Latin, from Ps 117 (Vulg. 116): *Laudate omnes gentes, laudate Dominum*. The popular Taizé chant is a fitting reminder of all those outside ancient Israel who heed the warning, accept the yoke, and join the chorus. Eroded speech is always a danger in the community of faith, but in this case Steiner's "energies of word and grammar" turn out not to be so supine.