

# Towards a Christological Reading of Selected Psalms

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In outlining various specific psalms below, I assign a summarizing title in *italics*, followed by selected comments that illustrate a Christological approach. And finally, a summary is given of the hermeneutic point(s) of standing implied by the Christological reading assigned to each psalm.

## **Psalm 1<sup>1</sup>**

*The Ideal Human King (and Those Who Choose His Path and Teachings) Sharply Contrast(s) the Fleeting Way of the Wicked*

This psalm gladly affirms the righteous path that Jesus<sup>2</sup> took, which contrasted sharply with that of the wicked and scornful. Jesus' fulfillment, so the NT clarifies for us, consisted not in physical avoidance of the wicked but rather in avoiding their immoral ways, stances and positions, a sense that is welcomed by the Psalm as well.

Psalm 1:1-3 echoes the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17:18-20; the echo is all the louder given Psalm 1's juxtaposition and thematic links with Psalm 2. And, as with Deut 17:18-20, Jesus showed no interest in amassing an army against the Romans (or against his native enemies), chose for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem a single humbler beast of burden, was celibate, and lived in abject poverty.

Our discussion so far should not mislead us into thinking that a Christological reading of the Psalms must exclude either the original writers or the faithful today. Indeed, as Martin Luther was to discover after his first attempt at commenting on the Psalms, to make Christ the *sole* speaker and subject matter of the entire Psalms did justice neither to the psalter nor to those who follow in God's ways. The later Luther, while continuing to interpret some psalms with reference to Christ-alone, broadened the scope of the psalter to include the life of the believer -- his or her experiences, prayers, expressions of worship and so on. In the psalms Luther saw healthily reflected *the Christian life*, which, after all, has as its source, life and goal *God*, who is none other than Jesus Christ. The later Luther now saw Christ in every

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<sup>1</sup> Michael LeFebvre, "Torah-Meditation and the Psalms: The Invitation of Psalm 1." In David Firth and Philip S. Johnston eds. *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 213-25; H.P. Nasuti, *Defining the Sacred Songs: Genre, Tradition and the Post-Critical Interpretation of the Psalms* (JSOTSup 218. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 165-208.

<sup>2</sup> It is unfortunate that the gender inclusivity reflected in the pluralized "Blessed are those who" of the NRSV blunts the original masculine singular form; the Hebrew "Blessed is the one who" sharpens the focus in such a way as to invite consideration of the object of fulfillment.

psalm in a different way, as the ultimate goal (*telos*) towards which the psalms and psalmists in varied ways were reaching.<sup>3</sup>

The contrast between the early and later Luther can be seen in a short summary of his on Psalm 1; where the early Luther precedes the later:

#### Psalm 1

"The letter is that the Lord Jesus did not yield to the favorite pursuits of the Jews and of the perverse and adulterous generation which were current in his time."

"Psalm 1 is a psalm of comfort. It admonishes us to gladly hear and learn God's Word and brings us comfort that, in so doing, we will have many and great benefits."<sup>4</sup>

In my judgment, an ideal Christological reading of Psalm 1 (and those to follow) today lies hermeneutically somewhere between the early and later Luther.<sup>5</sup> This is because something akin to the former has received fresh impetus and justification from what we now know about the later history of the formation of the Book of Psalms as well as of its history of interpretation into the time of the NT, which is authoritative for Christians.

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In addition, then, to seeing Christ as the speaker and subject matter of Psalm 1A (by his pronouncing the beatitude and fulfilling it too), and the speaker of Psalm 1B, a Christological reading of Psalm 1 must also include the one who seeks to follow in his righteous ways. This is warranted on several counts. First, functioning as an introduction to the psalter that is partly independent of Psalm 2, Psalm 1 bestows blessing on *any individual* who would choose to walk

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Cameron. I find it interesting to note that this same approach to the psalter is taken by the female reformer Katharina Schütz Zell in her justification for applying the Psalms (especially in her context, Psalm 51) specifically to Christ. She writes: "The fact is that I connect this Miserere with Jesus Christ, even though it was prayed before Christ became a man. It has struck me that we must all be preserved in Jesus Christ. According to the scripture [Isa. 9, Luk. 2:3, Joh. 4, Rev. 21, Isa. 22, Rev. 3], He is the savior of all flesh, the A[lpha] and O[mega], beginning and end, the key of David, who opens to all the faithful." (From section G8R of Catharina Schutz-Zell's *Meditations on the Psalms and the Lord's Prayer*, as translated by Rachel Lott, PhD of Wycliffe College and contained in my article entitled, "Katharina Schütz Zell (ca. 1498–1562) on a Hermeneutic Controversy about Whether or Not to Interpret the Penitential Psalms Christologically," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 75 [2019], pp. 40–67.)

<sup>4</sup> The later Luther's concluding quip on Psalm 1 seems apropos:

"At the close of this Psalm, I would admonish, as did many holy fathers like Athanasius and Augustine, that we do not simply read or sing the Psalms, as if they did not concern us; but let us read and sing them for the purpose of being improved by them, of having our faith strengthened, and our hearts comforted amid all sorts of [??] For the Psalter is nothing less than a school and exercise for our heart and mind, to the end, that we may have our thoughts and inclinations turned into the same channel. So that he reads the Psalter without spirit, who reads it without understanding and faith." (Quoted by Hengstenberg at the end of his commentary on Psalm 1, Commentary on the Psalms, volume 1, p. 18 (Wipf and Stock reprint)).

<sup>5</sup> This should not be taken to condone in any way the anti-semitism that came with Luther's Christocentric readings.

in the path of devotion to God's laws, which, as we have seen, were also mandated of the king.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Psalm one does not limit the beatitude to the king by saying "blessed is the king" but "blessed is [any] man." Second, even were the psalm not to bestow its blessing on individuals who choose his path, Jesus Christ, whose later beatitudes emulate the language and message of this and other psalmic beatitudes<sup>7</sup> did so in those beatitudes. And third, if we take seriously the partial coupling of Psalm 1 with Psalm 2 and the clear affinities between Psalm 2 and the penultimate Psalm 149, that the Hasidim there adopt the role of wreaking vengeance upon the nations assigned to the Christ in Psalm 2 implies a sharing of roles and duties between Christ and his "saints" that naturally spills over into Psalm 1.

Finally, there are two ways in which Christ can be seen in light of the New Testament as the *telos* of the instruction mentioned in Psalm 1:2. First, Christ fulfills the reference to "law" when understood as the teaching of the psalms. This claim can be made on the basis of Luke 24:44 where the various particulars Jesus gives in explication of his "fulfillment" of the Law, the Prophets *and the Psalms*—for example the suffering and death of the Messiah and the preaching of repentance to the Gentiles emanating from Jerusalem—are frequently supported by reference to Psalm texts. Thus, the "teaching" of the Psalms pertains to the ministry of the coming Messiah (as Psalm 2 also underscores) which Luke claims are "fulfilled" in Jesus Christ. And Second, Christ fulfills the reference to "law" when understood as the torah/teaching that precedes the Psalms, namely Mosaic "law." This claim can be made on the basis of NT texts (especially Matthew) where Jesus fulfills the law of Moses (Mt 5:17-20).<sup>8</sup>

In light of this, is it any wonder that Jesus in Matthew, as the new Moses, begins his own five speeches with the same words with which the Psalms begin, "Blessed" are they who?

Contrast is made with the wicked in Psalm 1:4-6.

The stance of Jesus is opposite to that of the wicked/morally corrupt (whom Psalm 2 invites us to equate with foreign rulers [Pilate, Herod, etc.; cf. Acts 4:25-27]). Given the introductory status of Psalm 1, Torah['s] rootedness includes the Pentateuch of Psalms, beginning preeminently with Psalm 2 which

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Deut 17:20 includes the king on the grounds that he is no more exempt from obedience to the law than the ordinary individual.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Ps 41:1 and Ps 112:1, which Psalm shares several other features with Psalm 1.

<sup>8</sup> As noted earlier, the "law" reference harks back not only to the Pentateuch but also to the very same sort of reference to "instruction" that we find in Psalm 1:2 (at the beginning of the Ketuvim) at the beginning of the Former Prophets (Josh. 1:7). In other words Psalm 1:2 and Josh 1:7 are canon-conscious redactional elements that serve to render the Prophets and Writings as in continuity with Torah. Comparison was made earlier with the glorious manifestation of Jesus communing with both Moses and Elijah, perhaps in illustration of the same concept of Jesus fulfilling the Tanakh.

proclaims the news of God's kingdom rule manifest in his begotten Son. It is a Torah path of wisdom, of suffering in solidarity with the son of David as Lord, and of taking refuge in Him.

#### Hermeneutical Points of Standing for Psalm 1:

1A: Either *about Christ* (who also fulfills) (cf. Deut 17:19-20) or one who shares His path (as aspirant) or spoken *by Christ* (cf. Mt 5:3-11, 17-20)—the motif of the David-to-come as a speaker of beatitudes is here established; cf. e.g. Isa 40:4a, 8; 41:1-3.

1B: *By Christ* (about the wicked) or *about the “anti-Christ”* (i.e. organized global opposition to the Christ as the agent of God's rule on earth)

## **Psalm 2**

*God Will (Re)Claim His Sovereignty Over Rebellious Gentile Nations through the Global Rule and Wrathful Power of His Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the King of the Jews.*

A “direct expression”<sup>9</sup> of 1) amazement over the folly of pagan rulers to conspire against the joint rule<sup>10</sup> of God and His beloved Christ (vv. 1-3); 2) God's dramatically scornful response to this folly because of and through the incarnation of His Son, King Jesus in Zion (vv. 4-7) which includes His divinely appointed prerogatives of dominion and judgment (vv. 8-9). Finally, 3) The pagan rulers (identified by Acts 4:25-28 as [though not necessarily limited to] Herod Antipas and Pilate) are urged to do (and shall do)<sup>11</sup> the opposite of what they historically did (i.e. serve reverently rather than dishonor; Kiss the Son rather than mock him; fear wrath of Son rather than inflict it on Him). Canonically, the psalm echoes the second-to-last Psalm, 149. There Israel's “king” is none other than YHWH himself (Christ being divine) (149:2). There, however, Christ's followers share in his ministry of judgment (Psalm 149:4-9). Opposition to Christ's rule indeed ends, resulting in nothing but the unopposed praise of God at the very end of time (Psalm 150).

Again, there is ample precedent for past Christological readings of Psalm 2. A memorable one comes from Luther who at one point (the early Luther?) equated the papacy with the conspiring rulers. Here I cite Luther via Prothero (p. 118):

“I love that psalm with all my heart. It strikes and flashes valiantly among kings, princes, counselors, judges, etc. If what this psalm says be true, then are the allegations and aims of

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<sup>9</sup> N.B. the direct speech by each party.

<sup>10</sup> Joint in light of the rulers opposing “their” fetters, etc, and joint in light of “God” and “the Son” in vv. 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Phil. 2:9-11.

the Papists stark lies and folly. If I were our Lord God, and had committed the government to my son, as He to His Son, and these vile people were as disobedient as now they be, I would knock the world in pieces."

The recent observation of Mays is more in keeping with at least one approach advocated here:

"the royal psalms themselves came at a later stage in their history to be read as hope for the one who comes .... Once Isaiah had been on the scene, the psalms began to be drawn into the context of prophecy itself, and to move into another genre. Within Old Testament history itself, these psalms began to be read and understood themselves as messianic prophecy. The inauguration they described awaited a candidate; the title 'Son of God' hung in the air because there was no specific human historical person to whom it could be given."

### Hermeneutical Points of Standing for Psalm 2

This psalm is

- concerns *Christ's Sitz im Leben* (2:1-2)
- written in part by enemies *about Christ/God* (2:3)
- about God, but not specifically Christ (2:4-5)
- with direct speech by God *about Christ* (2: 6, 7b-9) (Is this significant in relation to introductory role of Psalm 2 and the psalter as prophecies about the Davidic son?)
- with third-person admonitions to Christ's kingly opponents (Pilate, Herod; cf. Acts 4:25-27) to do the opposite of what they historically did (i.e. serve reverently rather than dishonor; Kiss the Son rather than mock him; fear wrath of Son rather than inflict it on Him).

### **Psalm 41 (Quoted in the NT--John 13:18)**

One can very easily hear Christ pronouncing the beatitude of verse 1, which contains a rich elaboration in vv. 2-3 concerning the mercy that will be shown to the merciful. (The word "has regard" belongs to the vocabulary of wisdom.)

Verses 4-9 begin with what in verse 4 can only be David [i.e. not Christ] speaking—the confession of personal sin clearly indicates this<sup>12</sup>—whereas verse 9 must apply primarily to Jesus Christ as the speaker (cf. John 13:18). The opposite poles of human David at one end and of Christ Himself at the other welcome a hybrid reading of what falls between. Certainly David and Jesus had enemies who wished them (i.e. either or both) dead (v. 5) and many

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<sup>12</sup> Perowne recounts how Horsley tried to justify including this verse as messianic on the grounds that if part of the psalm is quoted in the NT, the whole must be regarded as messianic. Perowne's response is compelling: Jesus' quote of this verse is itself partial and the confession of sin is personal. However, were one to insist on including this verb in attribution to Christ, the best way, as I see it, would be to see it as a bold extension of Christ's atoning death for our sins; namely that the one who bore our sins so identifies with us in our sinful condition as to, himself, confess as his own our sin; "He who knew no sin became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God."

came to them deceptively, talking to them with the sole purpose of trying to implicate him. The language in vv. 10-12 applies best to Christ, not only because they follow verse 9, spoken by Christ with reference to himself, but because of the Hebrew nuances.<sup>13</sup> In short, the language contains hyperbole that invites reference beyond the human David, and contains details readily applicable to Christ's character, resurrection and eternal presence with God.

Although verse 14 is a blessing that is appended as a conclusion to Book I, that it is also integral to Psalm 41, it is amendable to being read as *the human king David* affirming his risen and eternally exalted Successor. Amen and amen!

(Note regarding verse 11b: "that I may repay them." This Christ will do at his second coming. At any rate, the word is literally "grant peace" (the Hiphil of shalom]), a figure of speech that normally conveys its opposite. A Christological reading could perhaps see purpose in the ironic reversal in Hebrew wording.

### Hermeneutical Points of Standing for Psalm 41

Vv. 1-3: By Christ (vv. 1-3) on the grounds of Psalm 1, and the beatitudes.

V. 4: By the human David in which circumstance he found himself in the place of the weak in v. 1.

V.9: By Christ in light of John 13:18 (except where John omits the second line "whom I trusted"<sup>14</sup> but the implication remains of speech by Christ).

Vv. 5-8: By Christ the closer one moves away from v. 4 and to v. 9.

Vv. 10-12(13): By Christ

## **Psalms 20, 21, and 72B**

*A communal, exuberant, expression of confidence in the glorious future reign of Jesus Christ and the future of His Kingdom.*

Indeed, Psalms 20-21 and 72 are among the easiest psalms to read Christologically.

This would be a good place for someone new to the reading the psalter Christologically to begin, and with such I end.

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<sup>13</sup> I.e. God raising him up [the Hiphil of *qwm*], giving him victory over his enemies soon after being sorely afflicted, knowing that He is the one in whom God is well pleased [e.g. Mt. 3:17; 17:5], having integrity [the word *tmm* in Hebrew is commonly rendered "perfect"], and being placed [the Hiphil of *nsb*] in God's presence for ever..

<sup>14</sup> As Perowne has argued, this NT citation is important in its attestation of Jesus (via John of course) selectively fulfilling a portion of the Psalms. Far from being a problem, the omission of the words "whom I trusted" reads to Jesus' credit for not placing confidence in Judas Iscariot.

