



STUDIES *in* THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

PSALMS AS TORAH

Reading Biblical Song Ethically



GORDON J. WENHAM



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GORDON J. WENHAM

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CONTENTS

Series Preface ix

Author Preface xi

Abbreviations xiii

Introduction 1

1. Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms 11
 2. Critical Approaches to the Psalms 27
 3. The Psalter as an Anthology to Be Memorized 41
 4. The Unique Claims of Prayed Ethics 57
 5. The Concept of the Law in the Psalms 77
 6. Laws in the Psalter 97
 7. Narrative Law in the Psalter 119
 8. Virtues and Vices in the Psalter 139
 9. Appeals for Divine Intervention 167
 10. The Ethic of the Psalms and the New Testament 181
- Conclusion 203

Selected Bibliography 209

Scripture Index 217

Author Index 227

Subject Index 229

SERIES PREFACE

As a discipline, formal biblical studies is in a period of re-assessment and upheaval. Concern with historical origins and the development of the biblical materials has in many places been replaced by an emphasis on the reader and the meanings supplied by present contexts and communities. The Studies in Theological Interpretation series seeks to appreciate the constructive theological contribution made by Scripture when it is read in its canonical richness. Of necessity, this includes historical evaluation while remaining open to renewed inquiry into what is meant by history and historical study in relation to Christian Scripture. This also means that the history of the reception of biblical texts—a discipline frequently neglected or rejected altogether—will receive fresh attention and respect. In sum, the series is dedicated to the pursuit of constructive theological interpretation of the church’s inheritance of prophets and apostles in a manner that is open to reconnection with the long history of theological reading in the church. The primary emphasis is on the constructive theological contribution of the biblical texts themselves.

New commentary series have sprung up to address these and similar concerns. It is important to complement this development with brief, focused, and closely argued studies that evaluate the hermeneutical, historical, and theological dimensions of scriptural reading and interpretation for our times. In the light of shifting

and often divergent methodologies, the series encourages studies in theological interpretation that model clear and consistent methods in the pursuit of theologically engaging readings.

An earlier day saw the publication of a series of short monographs and compact treatments in the area of biblical theology that went by the name *Studies in Biblical Theology*. The length and focus of the contributions were salutary features and worthy of emulation. Today, however, we find no consensus regarding the nature of biblical theology, and this is a good reason to explore anew what competent theological reflection on Christian Scripture might look like in our day. To this end, the present series, *Studies in Theological Interpretation*, is dedicated.

AUTHOR PREFACE

Ten years ago I wrote a book titled *Story as Torah*, which discussed what contribution biblical narratives could make to understanding Old Testament ethics, a topic neglected in many volumes on this subject. Since then, I have noted another scholarly blind spot: the failure to recognize the influence of the psalms on the ethics of both Jews and Christians. I therefore have written this book as a sequel to the earlier volume and termed it *Psalms as Torah*. It aims to demonstrate the importance of the psalms particularly in molding Christian ethics and to offer an initial exploration of the ethics of the psalms.

The literature on the psalms and on ethics is vast, and I make no claim to have mastered it. Doubtless if I had read more widely, I would have nuanced my argument at many points. But I hope that specialists in the Psalter and in ethics will look mercifully on such deficiencies and focus on the main argument. Another matter that I fear may disappoint some readers is the lack of inclusive language. I recognize that I am old-fashioned, often using the generic “he” where others might prefer “they” or “he or she,” but it seems to me more elegant English and a closer approximation to Hebrew usage than inclusive alternatives. For the sake of non-Hebraists, I have followed

the numbering of chapters and verses from Psalms used in English translations.

Finally, I thank friends, colleagues, and research students whose comments and questions have helped me to formulate my ideas more clearly and, last but not least, the editors of Baker Academic, who prepared the text for publication with great care.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentary
ApOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BCR	Blackwell Companions to Religion
BibJS	Biblical and Judaic Studies
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BRS	Biblical Resource Series
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CahRB	Cahiers de la Revue biblique
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
CC	Continental Commentaries

CNTOT	<i>Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007
ESV	English Standard Version
ET	English Translation
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of Old Testament Literature
GBS	Grove Biblical Series
HALOT	Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Study edition. Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2001
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HTKAT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JRE</i>	<i>Journal of Religious Ethics</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
K&D	Keil, C. F., and F. Delitzsch, <i>Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament</i> . Translated by J. Martin et al. 25 vols. Edinburgh, 1875–78. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966–71
KJV	King James Version
LD	Lectio divina
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies
LPT	Library of Philosophy and Theology
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text

MTS	Münchener theologische Studien
NCB	New Century Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	Old Testament Studies
PBM	Paternoster Biblical Monographs
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SSN	Studia semitica neerlandica
SubBi	Subsidia biblica
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2004
<i>THAT</i>	<i>Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament</i> . Edited by E. Jenni, with assistance from C. Westermann. 2 vols. Stuttgart: Kaiser, 1971–76
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TW	Theologische Wissenschaft
UCOP	University of Cambridge Oriental Publications
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament

INTRODUCTION

For most of us, the formation of our ethical principles is largely unconscious. Perhaps we recall a specific occasion when our parents made a fuss about something we did wrong that has stuck with us. But most of what they taught us came from their example and chance remarks; these ideas we just quietly absorbed over many years. In later life we continue to pick up ethical ideas by gradual osmosis from the surrounding culture, our peers, and the mass media. Only if something drastically unconventional is being proposed do we wake up and start to debate its merits.

Similar processes are at work in the sphere of religious ethics. In some churches preachers may boldly denounce selected sins, usually those sins that not too many of their flock will have committed. It would be foolish to upset them if one wants to retain their membership! In other churches ethical instruction may form part of the instruction given to new believers. But I suspect that in the majority of Western churches ethical principles are picked up uncritically from the surrounding secularism, through informal discussion with other churchgoers, or from the liturgy—the prayers, songs, and hymns—that a particular congregation uses.

It is the ethic taught by the liturgy of the Old Testament, the Psalter, that is the focus of this book. The psalms were sung in the first and second temples, and in the subsequent two millennia they have

been reused in the prayers of the Jewish synagogue and the Christian church. As we will see, the psalms have much to say about behavior, about what actions please God and what he hates, so that anyone praying them is simultaneously being taught an ethic. Those who use the psalms as prayers are often not aware of this aspect, but I will argue this is one of the most potent forms of ethical indoctrination. It happens in all kinds of worship situations.

Take the Lord's Prayer as an example. Its opening invocation, "Our Father, who art in heaven," clearly teaches some very basic theology about the relationship between God and his people. If they should call him "Father," then they are his children. It is a relationship that involves intimacy, since he is our Father, and also distance, since he is in heaven. But there is also an ethical dimension to calling God "our Father in heaven." In a traditional patriarchal culture the father was an authority figure whose word was law in the family: he had to be obeyed. By saying "our Father," the early church at least was acknowledging divine authority and implicitly submitting to it. Whether the modern worshiper praying the Lord's Prayer intends this is another matter, as perceptions of family and fatherhood have changed drastically in many circles today, but in its original setting early Christians would have been clear about its moral implications.

Even today's worshipers cannot miss the ethical force of the fifth petition: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matt. 6:12). This clearly implies that if we want God to forgive us, we must be prepared to forgive others. In the Sermon on the Mount, immediately after giving his model prayer, Jesus underlines the importance of this clause: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14–15).

The inclusion of the "as-we-forgive" clause in the petition thus has disturbing implications. If we are unwilling to forgive other people, we should not ask God to forgive us. Forgiveness of others is necessary if we are to receive God's forgiveness. Praying the Lord's Prayer without forgiving others is hypocritical. In this way, the prayer is teaching ethics. In fact, it is making the point more powerfully than does the story of Joseph and his brothers or Jesus's parable about the unforgiving

debtor. One can simply hear these stories, perhaps admire them, but one does not have to act on them. But praying a prayer or singing a hymn is different. Prayers and hymns are addressed to God, so hypocrisy toward God is no use. Indeed, it could be counterproductive. A prayer such as “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” is akin to an oath in court, in that both prayer and oath are addressed to God and, by implication, invite God to act if the speaker is not truthful. We must ask whether it would be better not to pray the Lord’s Prayer than to pray it without forgiving those who trespass against us.

The ethical instruction imparted by the Lord’s Prayer is not peculiar to it. Many traditional prayers teach ethics. Many of the collects in the *Book of Common Prayer* originated in the fifth century and affirm Augustinian rather than Pelagian principles. For example, the collect for the ninth Sunday after Trinity begins, “Grant to us, Lord, the spirit to think and do always such things as be rightful; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will.” It has been well said that this prayer “expresses as succinctly as possible the whole doctrine of grace.”¹

In churches that do not use set liturgical prayers, the minister typically leads the prayer. In this way, consciously or unconsciously, he sets the agenda for the congregation. By praying for something to be done, he proclaims that he thinks this is important. If he prays for the evangelization of the neighborhood, or for the homeless persons downtown, or for peace in the Middle East, he indicates that he regards these objectives as most important. However, in this sort of prayer there is little pressure to assent to the minister’s agenda: a perfunctory “Amen” is all that is required of the rest of the congregation. And of course, hardly anyone will notice if someone not subscribing to the minister’s sentiments withholds the “Amen”!

The hymns and songs of apparently liturgy-free churches have much the same role as the prescribed prayers of liturgical worship. Both implicitly and explicitly they teach theology and ethics. Christmas carols, such as “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” or “O Come, All Ye

1. Massey Hamilton Shepherd Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary*, 200, quoted in L. E. H. Stephens-Hodge, *The Collects, with the Litany and the Occasional Prayers: An Introduction and Exposition* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961), 131.

Faithful,” proclaim and explain aspects of the incarnation. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” and “There Is a Green Hill Far Away” teach about the meaning of the crucifixion. Hymns such as “For All the Saints” and “Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending” instruct those who sing them about eschatology. These great hymns often have splendid tunes, which helps them to be remembered and recalled easily in various settings.

But ethical instruction is present in hymns and songs as well. Graham Kendrick’s song “The Servant King” has the refrain “This is our God, the Servant King; he calls us now to follow him.” George Herbert wrote,

Teach me, my God and king,
in all things thee to see
and what I do in anything
to do it as for thee.

Many a hymn prays for guidance in the Christian life: “Be thou my guardian and my guide”; “Guide me, O thou great redeemer.” Others inculcate Christian virtues: “Blessed are the pure in heart”; “Make me a channel of thy peace”; “O perfect love, all human thought transcending.” Some hymns strike a more militant note, urging the singer, “Fight the good fight with all thy might,” or “Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross.” Thus, the singing of hymns inculcates a variety of Christian truths and ethical principles; indeed, the worshiper is compelled to subscribe to them in the very act of singing. If one objects and refuses to sing a particular line or verse, it may well be noticed! Thus, there is a strong social pressure to conform as well as the theological imperative that we noted above, which is a consequence of a prayer or hymn being addressed to God.

A recent hymnbook whose compilers are not happy with the ethical stance of some older hymns decided either to omit or rewrite them. For example, “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war” becomes “Onward Christian pilgrims, Christ will be our light.” They comment,

We were also concerned that the book should use positive and appropriate images, and decided that militarism and triumphalism were, therefore, not appropriate. We recognise that military imagery is used

in the Bible, but history, including current events, shows only too clearly the misuse to which those images are open. All too often in the Christian and other religions, texts on spiritual warfare are used to justify the self-serving ambitions behind temporal conflicts. Christian “triumph” is the triumph of love which “is not envious or boastful or arrogant” (1 Cor. 13:4): the triumph of the cross.²

Now if, as most scholars believe, the psalms were written to be sung in the temple at Jerusalem and later were taken for use in the synagogue and the church, they must give an important window into Old Testament theology and ethics. They must also have exercised a profound influence on both Jewish and Christian thinking ever since. But surprisingly, although the theology of the psalms has been closely analyzed,³ their ethics have been largely ignored. Recent works on Old Testament ethics concentrate on the Law and the Wisdom literature, less often on the Prophets and Narrative books, but hardly ever on Psalms. For example, Eckart Otto’s *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments*⁴ has thirteen references to Psalms but forty to Proverbs and seventy-eight to Deuteronomy, although the book of Psalms is about three times as long as Proverbs or Deuteronomy. A similar disproportion is noticeable in Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics*.⁵ R. Norman Whybray, in *The Good Life in the Old Testament*,⁶ devotes one out of twenty-nine chapters to Psalms. Christopher J. H. Wright’s *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*⁷ has 50 percent more references to Deuteronomy than to Psalms; given the relative length of the two books, comments on Deuteronomy outweigh those on Psalms about four to one. The

2. Foreword to *Hymns Old and New: New Anglican Edition*, comp. Geoffrey Moore et al. (Bury St. Edmunds: Kevin Mayhew, 1996), n.p.

3. For example, Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), as well as many monographs.

4. Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments*, TW 3, no. 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994).

5. Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics*, OTS (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

6. R. Norman Whybray, *The Good Life in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002).

7. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, rev. ed. (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2004).

collection of essays *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*⁸ has barely two pages devoted to Psalms.

Stranger still is the neglect of Psalms in the monumental *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*,⁹ whose main thrust is that Christian ethics flows out of the liturgy. Although the psalms have been central to traditional Christian worship since New Testament times, there is no recognition in that volume of the contribution that the psalms make to Christian ethical thought.

Two recent works on the place of the psalms in the thought of Augustine and Luther show the importance of the Psalter for their theology and ethics and, by implication, for ours. In *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine*,¹⁰ Jason Byassee has as his aim that “we should read the Psalter like St. Augustine”—that is, allegorically and christologically. His book is an analysis of the exegetical methods used by Augustine in *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, the longest patristic commentary on Psalms. Byassee makes a number of observations about the ethical implications of the psalms, but he is mainly concerned with the rationale behind Augustine’s interpretative methods.

Brian Bock, in *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture*,¹¹ is concerned to elucidate the relationship between biblical texts and their ethical implications. After surveying modern approaches to biblical ethics, he focuses on the work of Augustine and Luther, both of whom wrote prolifically on the psalms. These theologians recognized the power of the psalms to transform their users when they pray. In his “Preface to the Psalter” Luther commented, “In the other books we are taught by both precept and example what we ought to do. This book not only teaches but also gives the *means and method* by which we may keep the precept and follow the example.”¹²

8. M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

9. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, BCR (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

10. Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

11. Brian Bock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

12. Quoted in *ibid.*, 170.

Praying the psalms gives us the strength to live the godly life, which they describe. According to Bock, “The essential point that Luther presses on us with increasing insistence is that we must understand how praise makes loving others possible.”¹³ Bock makes a number of astute observations about the relationship of the psalms and ethics, but he does not bring them into coherent focus.¹⁴

A short essay by Harry Nasuti, “The Sacramental Function of the Psalms in Contemporary Scholarship and Liturgical Practice,”¹⁵ carries tremendous insight into the way psalms affect and mold those who use them in worship, but its brevity leaves little scope for reflection on the Psalter as a whole.

This book, then, is an attempt to begin to deal with a blind spot in current biblical and theological thinking. I have called it *Psalms as Torah* out of my conviction that the psalms were and are vehicles not only of worship but also of instruction, which is the fundamental meaning of Torah, otherwise rendered “law.” From the very first psalm, the Psalter presents itself as a second Torah, divided into five books like the Pentateuch, and it invites its readers to meditate on them day and night, just as Joshua was told to meditate on the law of Moses (Ps. 1:2; Josh. 1:8).

Chapter 1 therefore begins with a review of the uses that Jews and Christians have made of the psalms from pre-Christian times down to the present. They have been incorporated into liturgy in a great variety of ways. This has made them extremely influential, as the frequent explicit quotation of them shows, but their subliminal influence probably has been even more significant.

Chapter 2 deals with the critical approaches to the psalms that have been advocated in the last two centuries. Precritical readers accepted the titles of the psalms as genuine and valid indicators of the circumstances of their composition, but this approach was abandoned in the nineteenth century. Instead, much energy was expended trying

13. *Ibid.*, 232.

14. For further discussion of Bock, see the articles in *European Journal of Theology* 18 (2009): 105–63.

15. Harry Nasuti, “The Sacramental Function of the Psalms in Contemporary Scholarship and Liturgical Practice,” in *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, ed. Stephen Breck Reid (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 78–89.

to infer from the content of each psalm when it may have been written. The conclusion often was that a particular psalm was written many years after David, but it was unusual for scholars to agree on how late a particular psalm was.

The mid-twentieth century was dominated by the approach of form criticism. This concluded that the psalms were composed for use in worship, many of them in the preexilic temple. The end of the century saw another turn in scholarship. Though not abandoning form-critical insights, scholarship has turned to examining the final form of the Psalter. It is argued by many that the Psalter is not a collection of random songs put together in no particular order, but rather a deliberately arranged anthology whose sequence is significant and indicative of the editors' concerns. Thus, this canonical approach has far-reaching implications for the interpretation of the psalms. It is particularly germane to a consideration of the impact of the psalms, for very often they are read and prayed in canonical sequence. In examining the ethics of the psalms, I will employ a version of canonical criticism.

Chapter 3 attempts to apply modern insights about the dissemination of sacred texts in antiquity to the Psalter. The classic texts of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece were committed to memory by the educated elite and passed on to the illiterate masses by recitation, often to music, at great national festivals. It has been argued that parts of the Old Testament were similarly recited at the Israelite feasts, so I will explore the possibility that the psalms were used in this way and the suggestion that the Psalter was an anthology to be memorized. I will look at the implications of memorization, oral transmission, and music for the influence of the psalms on biblical ethics.

Chapter 4 examines the nature of the claim made by a prayer on a worshiper. What relationship is presupposed by prayer, and how does this affect what the worshiper says in a prayer? Using insights from reader-response criticism and speech-act theory, I will argue that the claim made on the worshiper by the prayers that he utters is akin to a vow or an oath. Thus, the ethical pull of the psalms is more powerful than that of any other biblical medium, whether it be law, narrative, wisdom, or prophecy.

The next six chapters attempt an outline of the ethics implied and taught by the psalms. Chapter 5 explores how the Psalter views the

“law” and the attitude that the righteous should adopt toward it. Chapter 6 compares the teaching of the psalms with that of the laws in the Pentateuch. Among other issues, it compares the Psalter’s approach with that of the Ten Commandments, discussing both texts’ attitude toward punishment and toward the poor. Chapter 7 explores the Psalter’s use of the stories in the Pentateuch and attempts to draw out some of the major ethical lessons that the psalms see in these narratives. Chapter 8 discusses the contrasting characters of the righteous and wicked in the psalms and also the notion of the imitation of God. Chapter 9 looks at one of the chief problems in the Psalter’s picture of righteous behavior: the calls for divine intervention to save the besieged from the attacks of the wicked. How far is this compatible with a gospel ethic? This leads to chapter 10, a look at how New Testament writers use the psalms in defining a Christian ethic. After this, I present my conclusion.

1

JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN APPROACHES TO THE PSALMS

We begin a detailed review of the ethics of the psalms by looking for evidence of their use in the Old Testament period. In this chapter it is not my purpose to enter into the critical debates about the date of the psalms or the historical reliability of the narrative accounts of Old Testament worship (some of these issues will surface in the next chapter). Here my concern is simply to record what the canonical texts say about the use of the psalms in Old Testament times. I then will review the use of the psalms in subsequent eras.

The books of Samuel are framed by two psalms, the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10) and David’s song of deliverance (2 Sam. 22:2–51) (the first is not found in the Psalter, but the second is virtually the same as Ps. 18). There are a number of verbal links between the two songs, which suggests that their location in the books of Samuel is deliberate.¹ It is generally recognized that these two songs encapsulate

1. Especially close and numerous are the connections between Hannah’s song and David’s psalm. The latter also speaks of “horn,” “king,” and “anointed” (2 Sam. 22:3, 51), as well as enemies, against whom Yahweh helps (e.g., v. 4). Confessing God as “the rock” and the “only” God (v. 32) also occurs there, as well as the confidence that he will raise the lowly (vv. 17, 28, 49), care for the pious, and punish the evildoer (vv. 22, 26). His

some of the key themes of 1–2 Samuel. But for our purpose, it is not the message of these songs that interests us at the moment, but rather the incidental light that they shed on the use of psalms in worship. It is not clear whether Hannah is viewed as composing her song on the spot or as quoting or adapting some existing song; the close parallels with Psalm 113 have led some commentators to conclude that Hannah’s song is an adaptation of that psalm or vice versa.² The text simply says, “And Hannah prayed and said” (1 Sam. 2:1).

But what is clear is that her singing accompanied the offering of the sacrifice that she brought in fulfillment of her vow. Scholars may debate whether Hannah actually sang the song recorded in this passage, but its presence here clearly presupposes that it was accepted practice to sing psalms or similar songs to accompany sacrifice. This custom seems to be alluded to in other passages too. Songs and sacrifice accompanied the transfer of the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:5, 13–15). In 1 Kings 10:12 it is noted that almgud wood was brought from Ophir to make, among other things, “lyres and harps for the singers,” who probably were engaged in temple worship.

The books of Chronicles offer many more details about temple worship. According to 1 Chronicles 6:31–32, David appointed the Levites to lead worship in the Jerusalem sanctuary: “These are the men whom David put in charge of the service of song in the house of the LORD after the ark rested there. They ministered with song before the tabernacle of the tent of meeting until Solomon built the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they performed their service according to their order.” Among the musical Levites named are Heman, Asaph, and Ethan (1 Chron. 6:33, 39, 44; cf. 15:16–17).³

Song is first mentioned when the ark was brought from Kiriath-jearim to Jerusalem: “And David and all Israel were rejoicing before God with all their might, with song and lyres and harps and tambourines and cymbals and trumpets” (1 Chron. 13:8). It is not clear what

power as creator and ruler of the world as well as his lordship over death are also sung there with more or less the same concepts as in the song of Hannah (vv. 6, 8, 14, 16). See Walter Dietrich, *Samuel*, BKAT 8 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005), 73; David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, ApOTC (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 515–22.

2. For further discussion, see Dietrich, *Samuel*, 87–94.

3. Heman is said to be the author of Psalm 88, while Psalms 50; 73–83 are ascribed to Asaph, and Psalm 89 to Ethan.

role the Levites were playing in this carnival-like procession, which was cut short by the death of Uzzah (1 Chron. 13:9–14). However, when the transfer was resumed in a much more disciplined manner, the Levites were in charge of transporting the ark and led the accompanying music. First Chronicles 15:15–16 reports, “And the Levites carried the ark of God on their shoulders with the poles, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the LORD. David also commanded the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their brothers as the singers who should play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise sounds of joy.” When they arrived in Jerusalem, Chronicles records that David appointed the Levites to sing thanksgivings. The texts sung on this occasion are given in 1 Chronicles 16:8–36, and they correspond to Psalm 105:1–15 (1 Chron. 16:8–22); 96:1–13 (1 Chron. 16:23–33); and 106:47–48 (1 Chron. 16:35–36). Presumably, these are to be understood as just a selection of the psalms used on this great occasion. It is not clear what others may have been used.⁴

When the ark was brought into the newly built temple of Solomon, the singers sang, “For [the LORD] is good, for his steadfast love endures forever” (2 Chron. 5:13). The same refrain rang out after Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron. 7:3, 6); it is found in a number of psalms (Pss. 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29; 136:1). He also used Psalm 132:8–10 on this occasion (2 Chron. 6:41–42).

Some two centuries after Solomon, Hezekiah restored the temple worship. In 2 Chronicles 29:26–30 we are given a vivid picture of the use of music in the temple:

The Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. Then Hezekiah commanded that the burnt offering be

4. It is noteworthy that none of these psalms is given a title in the Psalter, let alone identified as a psalm of David. It may be that Chronicles understands the title “Of David” in Psalm 103 to apply to the following untitled psalms (Pss. 104–106). It is also interesting that all these psalms come from Book 4 of the Psalter (Pss. 90–106). Does Chronicles imply that all of Book 4 was sung when the ark was installed in Jerusalem? C. F. Keil (*The Books of the Chronicles*, trans. Andrew Harper, K&D [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966], 211–18) thinks that 1 Chronicles 16:8–36 was originally a Davidic psalm that was subsequently developed into the three separate psalms that we find in the Psalter. But it is more probable to suppose, with A. F. Kirkpatrick (*The Book of Psalms*, CBSC [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902], 615) and Sara Japhet (*I & II Chronicles*, OTL [London: SCM, 1993], 313), that the Chronicler has brought together three originally independent psalms.

offered on the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song to the LORD began also, and the trumpets, accompanied by the instruments of David king of Israel. The whole assembly worshiped, and the singers sang and the trumpeters sounded. All this continued until the burnt offering was finished.

When the offering was finished, the king and all who were present with him bowed themselves and worshiped. And Hezekiah the king and the officials commanded the Levites to sing praises to the LORD with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshiped.

This passage indicates that singing accompanied the offering of the sacrifices and continued afterward. It also states that psalms of David and Asaph, “the words of David and of Asaph,” were used. The Passover celebrations that soon followed were also marked by song. According to 2 Chronicles 30:21–22, “The people of Israel who were present at Jerusalem kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with great gladness, and the Levites and the priests praised the LORD day by day, singing with all their might to the LORD. . . . So they ate the food of the festival for seven days, sacrificing peace offerings and giving thanks to the LORD, the God of their fathers.”

According to 2 Chronicles 20:21, Jehoshaphat exhorted his army, and then they went into battle with a choir singing, “Give thanks to the LORD, for his steadfast love endures for ever.” This refrain introduces a number of psalms (e.g., Pss. 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 136:1) whose sentiments could be seen as appropriate for a devout army to chant.

The fact that Chronicles was written six centuries after the time of David and that the parallel passages in the books of Samuel barely mention his contribution to temple music prompted Wilhelm de Wette⁵ (1806–7) and later Julius Wellhausen⁶ (1878) to challenge the reliability of Chronicles. Its testimony is often seen to be a reflection of what the postexilic author thought should have been sung and done in the first temple rather than a reliable witness to what really

5. Wilhelm M. L. de Wette, *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 2 vols. (Halle: Schimmelpfennig, 1806–7).

6. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1957 [1878]).

happened in the times of the monarchy. But as far as the psalms are concerned, the work of form critics such as Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel has made it much more plausible to suppose that many psalms were originally used in the preexilic temple. As H. G. M. Williamson has observed, “That David should have had a particular interest in the music of the cult, and made arrangements for it, is in itself highly probable. His association with music is known from ancient traditions.”⁷

Furthermore, other temples in the ancient Near East had singers attached to them,⁸ so it would be surprising if the Jerusalem temple had none. For our purpose, it matters little which critical stance is taken. It is sufficient to recognize that the books of Chronicles and the titles of the psalms point to a conviction that the psalms were used from earliest times in Jerusalem’s public worship. Those who reject Chronicles’ testimony about the music of the first temple generally suppose that it reflects the practices of the second temple.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah give us glimpses of worship in the fifth century BC. There were singers who served both in the temple and from time to time elsewhere. Two hundred male and female singers returned from Babylon with the first group (Ezra 2:65).⁹ They settled in villages outside Jerusalem (Ezra 2:70; Neh. 12:29) and should have enjoyed, as Levites, a share of the tithes (Neh. 11:23; 13:10). They traced their office back to the time of David (Neh. 12:46). Their first duties are described in Ezra 3:10–11:

And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD,

“For he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

7. H. G. M. Williamson, *I & II Chronicles*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 73.

8. Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas, 2 vols. in 1, BRS (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 2:80.

9. The 245 reported in Nehemiah 7:67 probably is a textual error. See H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Waco: Word, 1985), 28.

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

We have noted that this psalm fragment is used several times in Chronicles, so it seems likely that “here it is intended to be illustrative of the type of psalms of praise that would have been used on such an occasion.”¹⁰

At the completion of the temple there is no mention of what the Levites sang; it is noted only that “they set . . . the Levites in their divisions” (Ezra 6:18). But when the fortification of Jerusalem was complete, two choirs with accompanying bands processed around the newly rebuilt walls. They set out from the Valley Gate at the southwest of the city. One procession headed north, moving around the city clockwise, while the other headed south and then east, circling the city in a counterclockwise direction. They met in the temple courtyard. Nehemiah 12:40–43 then reports, “So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I [Nehemiah] and half of the officials with me. . . . And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader. And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.” We are not told the text of the thanksgiving songs, but it seems likely that selected psalms were used. These were sung by the professional singers, but there is a hint that the people, “women and children,” joined in.

I will argue later that the present shape of the Psalter suggests that it was a book designed to be memorized. It is therefore intriguing that commentators have noticed close parallels between some of the psalms and the prayers in Nehemiah. Nehemiah 4:4–5 is Nehemiah’s prayer against Sanballat and his allies. “The whole prayer is reminiscent of such Psalms as 44, 74 and 79.”¹¹ Even more striking is the national confession in Nehemiah 9. This “is often compared with Psalm 106 precisely because both passages use historical recollection as a vehicle for confession and as a ground on which to base an appeal for mercy.”¹²

10. *Ibid.*, 48.

11. *Ibid.*, 217.

12. *Ibid.*, 307. Klaus-Dietrich Schunck (*Nehemia*, BKAT 23 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009], 274) observes that the penitential prayer is probably made up of a collection of liturgical texts. Nehemiah 9:5 makes it clear that it opened with a hymn.

Other psalms whose similarity with Nehemiah 9 has been noted include Psalms 38; 51; 105; 130; 135; 136. In some cases the similarity is solely one of penitential tone, but the detailed review of Israel's history in other psalms is sufficiently close to make probable some dependence of Nehemiah 9 on them. If the devout in Israel were already memorizing the psalms, we could readily explain the similarities.

For the use of the psalms in the intertestamental period there are two main sources: the books of Maccabees¹³ and the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran. In the books of Maccabees we see psalms being used in contexts similar to those described in Chronicles: the rededication of the temple and in or after battle. For example, in the battle against Gorgias, “[Judas] raised the battle cry, with hymns; then he charged against Gorgias's troops” (2 Macc. 12:37). They did the same after defeating Gorgias: “On their return they sang hymns and praises to Heaven—‘For he is good, for his mercy endures forever’” (1 Macc. 4:24). At the rededication of the temple in 164 BC they offered sacrifice and sang psalms. “They rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering that they had built. . . . It was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals” (1 Macc. 4:53–54; cf. 2 Macc. 10:7).

The Dead Sea Scrolls are generally believed to have been deposited by the occupants of the Qumran settlement, which was founded by dissident priests from Jerusalem.¹⁴ They held that Jonathan Maccabeus had apostatized by assuming the high priesthood, so they set up their own community dedicated to observing the law strictly. Their community at Qumran operated rather like a monastery, with long hours devoted to study and prayer. Among the biblical texts recovered from the Qumran caves were fragments of thirty-six Psalms manuscripts, which is more than any other biblical book (Deuteronomy [30×] and Isaiah [21×] were the next most copied books).¹⁵ The sheer number of manuscripts shows the importance of the psalms to this

13. Apocrypha quotations are from the NRSV.

14. For a summary of modern scholarly opinion, see John J. Collins, “Dead Sea Scrolls,” *ABD* 2:85–101.

15. Daniel C. Harlow, “The Hebrew Bible in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John William Rogerson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 943.

Jewish sect, but we do not know how they used them. Philo (*On The Contemplative Life* 80) mentions that at their banquet on the Feast of Pentecost the president commented on the Scriptures and then rose and chanted a hymn, either of his own making or an old one. Then all the others did the same. An “old hymn” could well have been a psalm. We have seen from Samuel and Chronicles that often sacrifice was accompanied by the singing of psalms. But at Qumran the priests could not offer sacrifice, so one might well surmise that they hung on to the tradition of psalm singing even more ardently. The specifically sectarian scrolls, such as the *Community Rule*, the *War Rule*, and the *Thanksgiving Hymns*,¹⁶ give an insight into their own compositions and show a deep indebtedness to the psalms.¹⁷

Use of the Psalms in Worship in the Second Temple and the Synagogue

Although it is generally agreed that the psalms were sung in the rebuilt temple in the centuries preceding the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, it is very difficult to know which psalms were used on which occasion. It is likely that later synagogue practice reflects older temple practice at many points, but in most cases it is impossible to be dogmatic. At one point, though, we can be sure of continuity between temple and later practice. According to the Septuagint (second-century-BC Greek translation),¹⁸ certain psalms were to be sung on different days of the week.¹⁹ This is confirmed by the Mishnah and continues to be the case to the present.

16. For translations, see Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962).

17. See William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 106–10.

18. According to Henry B. Swete, “At what time the Greek Psalter assumed its present form there is no evidence to shew, but it is reasonable to suppose that the great Palestinian collections of sacred song did not long remain unknown to the Alexandrian Jews; and even on the hypothesis of certain Psalms being Maccabean, the later books of the Greek Psalter may be assigned to the second half of the second century” (*An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902], 25).

19. Psalm 24 (Sunday), 48 (Monday), 82 (Tuesday), 94 (Wednesday), 81 (Thursday), 93 (Friday), 92 (Saturday). Only the Mishnah states the psalms for Tuesday and Thursday (see tractate *Tamid* 7:4).

Some psalms are used in the daily synagogue services. These include Psalms 6; 20; 25; 30; 134; 145–150, as well as many individual verses from other psalms. On the Sabbath more psalms are used, including, among Ashkenazi Jews, Psalms 19; 29; 34; 90–93; 95–99; 104; 120–136; 145–150.²⁰ On the great festivals—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles—it is customary to recite Psalms 113–118, the so-called Egyptian Hallel. At the Passover meal Psalms 113–114 are recited before the Seder meal, and Psalms 115–118 after it.

William Holladay has calculated that out of the 150 psalms, 57 are regularly used in worship. He points out that the Jewish liturgy prefers the positive psalms, such as hymns, songs of confidence, wisdom psalms, and hymns of Yahweh’s kingship. Despite being the commonest type of psalm, few laments are used in Jewish worship. And none of the messianic psalms (Pss. 2; 72; 110) is regularly used. But he points out that there is a strong tradition of reciting the whole Psalter privately on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis.²¹

Use of the Psalms in Worship in the Early Church

There are more quotations from Psalms in the New Testament than from any other Old Testament book.²² But references to their use in worship are more limited. According to Mark, the Last Supper ended this way: “And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Mark 14:26 [// Matt. 26:30]). The “hymn” is most likely a reference to the second half of the Hallel, Psalms 115–118, traditionally recited at the Passover Seder. Insofar as the Christian Eucharist is a reenactment of the Last Supper, it may well be that the custom of singing psalms at the Eucharist can be traced back to this occasion. In several passages Paul mentions the practice of singing psalms. In 1 Corinthians 14:26 he says, “When you come together, each one has a psalm [*psalmos*]” (my translation).²³ This is part of his instruction on how the Lord’s Supper

20. Holladay, *Psalms*, 142–43. Sephardi Jews use a different selection.

21. *Ibid.*, 144–46.

22. *Ibid.*, 115. There are fifty-five citations of Psalms in the New Testament, and forty-seven from Isaiah, which ranks second.

23. Here many translations render the word *psalmos* as “hymn,” but clearly it means “psalm” elsewhere in the New Testament (see Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

should be conducted in an orderly fashion. His admonition in Colossians 3:16 (cf. Eph. 5:19) is more general and seems to encourage the use of the psalms in a wide variety of contexts, perhaps even in prison (cf. Acts 16:25):²⁴ “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

The importance of the Psalter in the subapostolic period is witnessed by works such as *1 Clement* (ca. AD 96). This contains 172 citations from the Old Testament, of which 49 are from Psalms, mainly used to make a moral appeal.²⁵

Similarly, in the second century Justin Martyr and Irenaeus drew heavily on the psalms in their writings. We are unable to track exactly how the psalms were used by Christians in this period, but by the beginning of “the fourth century the memorization of the Psalms by many Christians and their habitual use as songs in worship by all Christians about whom we know were matters of long-standing tradition.”²⁶

The use of the psalms in Christian devotion was most eloquently advocated by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in his *Letter to Marcellinus*. Athanasius says that he is passing on the wisdom of a “studious old man” with whom he once discussed the psalms, but there is no doubt that Athanasius thoroughly agrees with the old man’s ideas. From this letter it is clear that Athanasius primarily sees the psalms as an aid to private prayer. He holds that there is a psalm for every mood and circumstance of life. “Whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill.”²⁷

Suppose, then, that you want to declare any one to be blessed; you find the way to do it in Psalm 1, and likewise in 32, 41, 112, 119 and

24. The verb *hymneō* is used in Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26; Hebrews 2:12 to indicate the singing of psalms. Jesus’s two quotations from Psalms in Mark 15:34 (// Matt. 27:46), citing Psalm 22:1, and Luke 23:46, quoting Psalm 31:5, may imply that he was reciting psalms as he hung on the cross.

25. Holladay, *Psalms*, 162.

26. *Ibid.*, 165.

27. Athanasius, “The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms,” in *On the Incarnation: The Treatise “De Incarnatione Verbi Dei,”* trans. a religious of C.S.M.V., rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 103.

128. If you want to rebuke the conspiracy of the Jews against the Saviour, you have Psalm 2. If you are persecuted by your own family and opposed by many, say Psalm 3; and when you would give thanks to God at your affliction's end, sing 4 and 75 and 116. When you see the wicked wanting to ensnare you and you wish your prayer to reach God's ears, then wake up early and sing 5.²⁸

Let each one, therefore, who recites the Psalms have a sure hope that through them God will speedily give ear to those who are in need. For if a man be in trouble when he says them, great comfort will he find in them; if he be tempted or persecuted, he will find himself abler to stand the test and will experience the protection of the Lord.²⁹

In this letter Athanasius sees the Psalter primarily as a source for private prayer, but at various points he alludes to its use in public worship. He suggests that Psalm 32, beginning with "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered," would be appropriately sung at a baptism. He continues, "Whenever a number of you want to sing together, being all good and upright men, then use the 33rd"³⁰ ("Shout for joy in the LORD, O you righteous! Praise befits the upright").

Athanasius suggests that certain psalms are appropriate for different days of the week. "Do you want to give thanks on the Lord's Day? Then say the 24th; if on a Monday, then the 95th; and if on a Friday, your words of praise are in the 93rd."³¹ The psalm for Wednesday is Psalm 94. He recommends the use of Psalm 100 in evangelism: "When you see the providence and power of God in all things and want to instruct others in His faith and obedience, get them first to say the 100th psalm."³²

Athanasius speaks of singing the psalms as well as saying them. It appears that he expects Marcellinus not only to know the words of

28. *Ibid.*, 107–8.

29. *Ibid.*, 117.

30. *Ibid.*, 109.

31. *Ibid.*, 112. It is striking that Athanasius recommends singing the same psalms that the Jews do on the same days of the week. This may be due to the LXX titles of the psalms (e.g., Pss. 93; 94), but it could also reflect the continuity of worship patterns from Old Testament times into the early church.

32. *Ibid.*

the psalms by heart but also to know their tunes. Athanasius argues that singing the psalms is particularly valuable because it leads to total concentration on the words.

To sing the Psalms demands such concentration of a man's whole being on them that, in doing it his usual disharmony of mind and corresponding bodily confusion is resolved. . . . It is in order that the melody may thus express our inner spiritual harmony, just as the words voice our thoughts, that the Lord Himself has ordained that the Psalms be sung and recited to a chant.

Those who do sing as I have indicated, so that the melody of the words springs naturally from the rhythm of the soul and her own union with the Spirit, they sing with the tongue and with the understanding also, and greatly benefit not themselves alone but also those who want to listen to them.³³

Athanasius mentioned that certain psalms are suitable for particular days of the week or occasions such as baptism. Preaching about a century later than Athanasius, Augustine often refers to the psalm that has just been sung. It was customary in the weekly celebration of the Eucharist to have three readings from Scripture, one from the Old Testament, one from the Epistles, and one from the Gospels. Between the Old Testament reading and the Epistle, or between the Epistle and the Gospel, a psalm was sung. In Augustine's time the church in Carthage introduced the custom of singing psalms during the distribution of the elements of the Eucharist.

From Augustine's sermons it is clear that the psalm for Christmas day was Psalm 85, and for Good Friday Psalm 22. For the vigil of Easter Eve Psalm 118 was used, and for the Sunday after Easter Psalm 116. For the eve of Pentecost he used Psalm 141, and for the Monday after Pentecost Psalm 2.³⁴ We cannot be sure how closely other parts of the church followed the pattern described by Augustine in his day. But by the seventh century the custom of using a psalm between the Old Testament reading and the Epistle was the universal pattern of eucharistic worship. It was also customary to sing a psalm

33. *Ibid.*, 114–15.

34. Holladay, *Psalms*, 167–68.

or part of a psalm right at the beginning of the service as the priest entered.³⁵

The establishment of monasteries involved the discipline of communal prayer in which the psalms played a central part. It became customary to recite the entire Psalter in the course of the week. The highly influential rule of St. Benedict prescribed which psalms were to be used at which office. Some psalms were prayed every day. For example, at daybreak (Lauds) Psalms 51; 67 were said, and at the last service of the day (Compline) Psalms 4; 91; 134 were used. But all the psalms were recited at least once a week.³⁶

It was not just in church and monastery that the psalms were used. Pious laity used them in their prayers too. King Alfred the Great “was frequent in psalm-singing and prayer at the hours both of the day and night,”³⁷ and he carried with him a book “wherein the daily courses and psalms, and prayers which he had read in his youth were written.”³⁸ In the Middle Ages the Psalter was the only portion of Scripture that the laity was permitted to own.

The advent of printing followed by the Reformation changed this. The reading of Scripture was encouraged, and books became more affordable. In the Reformed churches the psalms had a central place in worship. As a monk, Martin Luther was brought up on the Psalter, and he continued to pray the psalms in Latin long after he had translated the Bible into German.³⁹ He held that the psalms should be the core of public worship too. “The whole Psalter, Psalm by Psalm, should remain in use, and the entire Scripture, lesson by lesson, should continue to be read to the people.”⁴⁰ His first hymn-book contained twenty-three hymns, of which six were metrical paraphrases of the psalms.

Use of the psalms, often in metrical form, became even more characteristic of churches in the Calvinist tradition. Martin Bucer, the

35. *Ibid.*, 174–75.

36. *Ibid.*, 175–76.

37. John A. Giles, *Six Old English Chronicles* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1872), 68, quoted in Holladay, *Psalms*, 177.

38. Giles, *Six Old English Chronicles*, 76, quoted in Holladay, *Psalms*, 178.

39. Holladay, *Psalms*, 192.

40. “An Order of Mass for the Church at Wittenberg,” in *Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 468, quoted in Holladay, *Psalms*, 195.

Strasbourg reformer, had produced a German prayer book that included all the psalms, and John Calvin, while he stayed in Strasbourg, started to produce a French metrical Psalter. Eventually, by 1562, all the psalms had been translated into metrical verse.

In the English-speaking world, collections of metrical psalms were produced by Sternhold and Hopkins (1549) and by Tate and Brady (1696). Compared with the original Hebrew, these metrical psalms are wordy and often unpoetic, but some of them survive in modern hymnbooks—for example, “As Pants the Hart for Cooling Streams” (Ps. 42) and “Through All the Changing Scenes of Life” (Ps. 34). These collections of metrical psalms continued to be used in Presbyterian churches until relatively recently, but the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) used Coverdale’s fairly literal translation (1539). This provides for the entire Psalter to be prayed over the course of a month at morning and evening prayer. In public worship the psalms can be sung to flexible tunes called “chants.”

The Counter-Reformation led to an overhaul of liturgical practice in the Roman Catholic Church, including the use of the psalms. In the course of the year verses from 111 psalms were used in the Mass, but, except on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, complete psalms were not recited. And of course, worship was conducted in Latin, which few laypeople understood. Consequently, “lay Catholics were then not privy to the excitement experienced by lay Protestants as they heard full psalms in their vernaculars.”⁴¹

However, the clergy fared better. Not only did they learn Latin but also all of them were expected to recite the breviary, which included all the psalms. Some psalms, such as Psalms 51; 95, were prayed nearly every day, but in the course of the week every verse of every psalm was covered. Parish priests prayed privately, but in the monasteries the psalms were sung to Gregorian chant.

Subsequent centuries have seen more use of the psalms among Catholic laity. The Second Vatican Council not only encouraged the use of the local languages instead of Latin but also provided for the greater use of the psalms in the Mass. The custom of the early church has been revived of reciting a psalm or part of a psalm between the

41. Holladay, *Psalms*, 222.

Old Testament reading and the Epistle. On Sundays and Saints' days 79 of the 150 psalms are appointed for use, while at weekday masses 124 psalms have been utilized. At the same time, demands on priests and religious have been reduced, so that most of the Psalter is prayed over a period of a month instead of a week.

Among Protestants, the psalms have continued to be an important part of public worship and private devotion. Two centuries of missionary work and Bible translation have made them available to hundreds of language groups throughout the world. But in the English-speaking world use of the psalms has often languished, as hymns and worship songs with catchy tunes have tended to displace the psalms, which are not so easy to sing. This trend would have appalled the apostolic church and the great reformers, and more recent writers such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Walter Brueggemann. While one may hope that this modern failure to appreciate the psalms as vehicles of prayer proves to be a blip, it does not obscure their traditional function, which will form the basis for the ensuing discussion.