

PSALMS 101–150

J A S O N B Y A S S E E



BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2018 by Jason Byassee

Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Byassee, Jason, author.

Title: Psalms 101–150 / Jason Byassee.

Description: Grand Rapids : Brazos Press, 2018. | Series: Brazos theological commentary on the Bible | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017055341 | ISBN 9781587433528 (cloth : alk. paper)

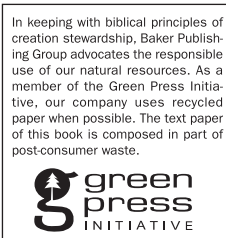
Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Psalms, CI-CL—Commentaries.

Classification: LCC BS1430.53 .B93 2018 | DDC 223/.207—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017055341>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



For James Howell
preacher, mentor, friend

CONTENTS

Series Preface ix
Acknowledgments xvi
Abbreviations xix
Introduction xxi

Psalm 101	1	Psalm 118	117	Psalm 135	172
Psalm 102	6	Psalm 119	126	Psalm 136	178
Psalm 103	14	Psalm 120	130	Psalm 137	185
Psalm 104	22	Psalm 121	133	Psalm 138	189
Psalm 105	34	Psalm 122	136	Psalm 139	193
Psalm 106	44	Psalm 123	140	Psalm 140	202
Psalm 107	52	Psalm 124	142	Psalm 141	207
Psalm 108	62	Psalm 125	145	Psalm 142	211
Psalm 109	67	Psalm 126	147	Psalm 143	214
Psalm 110	75	Psalm 127	150	Psalm 144	218
Psalm 111	85	Psalm 128	152	Psalm 145	223
Psalm 112	91	Psalm 129	155	Psalm 146	228
Psalm 113	95	Psalm 130	158	Psalm 147	232
Psalm 114	99	Psalm 131	161	Psalm 148	238
Psalm 115	102	Psalm 132	163	Psalm 149	244
Psalm 116	108	Psalm 133	168	Psalm 150	248
Psalm 117	115	Psalm 134	170		

Bibliography 251
Author Index 252
Scripture and Ancient Writings Index 254
Subject Index 260

SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure

for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.¹

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”² Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia*, trans. Joseph W. Trigg (London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

2. *Against Heresies* 9.4.

upon” the words of scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of scripture is encumbered in our own day.”³ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”⁴ We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think of him stage-managing the diversity of scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”⁵ In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.⁶ To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”⁷ The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” 340.

5. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

of a doctrinally ruled reading of scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapse, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading—an interpretation unprejudiced—the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems.

The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jer. 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”⁸ This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars produce monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army has been fragmented, and various corps have retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis.

8. *Sermon 212.2.*

Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible endorses a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, and in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not

reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm so grateful to have gotten to spend years with Psalms 101–150 for the sake of the Brazos Theological Commentary on Scripture. I owe thanks to Rusty Reno for the invitation to write, to Dave Nelson for his editorial help at Brazos, and to Eric Salo for his editing work. I'm honored beyond what I can say to be part of a series with such extraordinary authors. It is grace to have this volume included in that number.

I began writing this commentary while pastoring Boone United Methodist Church in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina, and completed it while teaching preaching at the Vancouver School of Theology (VST). I am grateful to friends, parishioners, and colleagues in both places for their input in writing and editing. Davis Hankins of Appalachian State; Pat Dutcher-Walls, Laura Duhan Kaplan, and Harry Maier of VST; and Shawn Flynn, then of St. Mark's College and now of St. Joseph's College at the University of Alberta, all read chapters and made helpful suggestions and saved me from (some of my) mistakes.

James Howell read so many chapters so well that I just kept sending them to him. I first started learning from James as a college freshman at Davidson and intend to keep on learning from him as long as I can. He was a good enough friend to say hard things that I needed to hear (“You're rushing in this section!” “Quit the academic pretension!” “Say something for us preachers!”). James, under the great Roland Murphy at Duke, did his own dissertation on Psalm 90 in the history of Israel's and the church's interpretation. I learned some of the love for the psalms in the history of God's people from James, through him from Father Murphy, and through them back, back, back. . . . A key contention of this work is that the communion of the saints includes the author and the reader of scripture. There are

always more interpreters and more hearers than we can see or imagine—and we get to join in their long-standing conversation about the meaning of the scriptures in our life together. I am grateful to James for including me in this ongoing raucous argument. This book is dedicated to him with so much gratitude.

I learned much about the psalms from the monks of Mepkin Abbey. I started going for retreats in that perfectly named hamlet in South Carolina, Monck's Corner (named for some guy named Monck, not for the monks), while in seminary. I watched the monks chant from their Psalters seven times a day, obeying the psalmist's directive with outrageous enthusiasm: "Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances" (Ps. 119:164). Some of the older monks didn't have to open their Psalters—they knew, as the ancient church would say, "the whole David." Yet those physical books, handwritten by the nuns from another monastery, were instructive. Inside their front covers was a quote from St. Augustine about how the psalms are prayed by Christ. This is obvious enough: in key moments of Jesus's life and ministry the psalms are on his lips, as they would be on any Jew's. But Augustine goes on—they are prayed by *the whole Christ*, head and members, as Paul says. Sometimes Jesus Christ speaks as his head in the psalms, referring to his own life and ministry. Sometimes he speaks in us, his members, who are bound to him by baptism and being transfigured by him from sinners into saints. Sometimes Christ expresses his suffering for us, even his "sins" (really *our* sins absorbed by him) as a result of being joined to us in the incarnation. Other times he expresses his triumph, naming his resurrection, ascension, and eventual gathering of all his people into his body. I couldn't believe how beautiful the notion was, how deep and magical and mysterious. I'm still trying to fathom it. I do some of that fathoming in this book. And so I should thank the monks of Mepkin Abbey. In a later delightful turn, I got to introduce the Methodists of Boone to the monks of Mepkin and watch them approximate the one body of Christ together.

I started to study the psalms in conjunction with the history of the church under Robert Wilken, who let me audit his course at the University of Virginia when I was flailing in graduate school at Duke. I remember how odd it all seemed—how could any reader claim to know what a text meant before he or she even started reading, even if that meaning was Jesus Christ? Wilken has been one of the crucial scholars reintroducing the church and the academy that serves it to the strange, counterintuitive, and wonderful way of reading the psalms that the church pursued for millennia, like Israel before us. I don't contend we have to read every line in an explicitly christological way—Steve Chapman at Duke taught me Brevard Childs well enough to avoid that—since the Old Testament often refers

to Christ without mentioning him. Nevertheless, christological exegesis is so beautiful the church has often deployed it liberally, maximally, and with delight. Wilken turned to me at one point in class and suggested I write my dissertation on Augustine's commentary on the psalms, just then appearing in English. I did, and that became my book *Praise Seeking Understanding*. One of the editors of that volume, Peter Ochs, got me involved with Scriptural Reasoning and its remarkable practice of having Jews, Christians, and Muslims read our respective scriptures together. I have continued with christological exegesis partly because I think that gives us Christians something worthwhile and genuinely different to say in such conversations—and of course the fruit of our readings has to be a blessing to our interlocutors, to their communities, and to the world.

In this book I try to expand the list of interpreters from whom I learn beyond Augustine, though he is still at the center. The edges include other patristic, Jewish, Reformed, and modern interpreters. I am a little harder on historical criticism in my earlier book than I now wish I were. There is no reason to be above learning from absolutely anyone. The ultimate arbiter of meaning, however, is not the historian's best reconstruction of what the original author intended, though that can be valuable to contemplate. It is rather what God is saying to the church now, as God transforms us into the blessing to the world that God intends. Right now God is working to knit the universe back together. The church has often been a counter-witness to God's work of repair, especially in much of our relationship to our Jewish forebears and neighbors. The way to do better, I contend, is not to read the text as though Jesus does not matter to us Christians. I don't detect in Jewish interlocutors any resentment toward Christians for reading like Christians. The way to do better is to read Israel's scripture in a way that honors Israel. I try hard to do that here but don't doubt I have failed more than once in this and in many other ways. I trust the God of Israel is as merciful as our stories and psalms say he is.

The real determination of the validity of an exegetical approach is the character of the people it produces. I hope this book helps the church contemplate God's unendingly gracious character in such a way as to become full of grace ourselves, as we constantly pass it on to others. If this work helps toward that end, it will not have been a fool's errand. But that result, like all other results, is in the hands of the one to whom all praise and honor are due.

ABBREVIATIONS

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song of Sol.	Song of Solomon
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esther	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Ps. (Pss.)	Psalms (Psalms)	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal

Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon	2 Macc.	2 Maccabees
Sir.	Sirach		

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	1-2 Thess.	1-2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1-2 Tim.	1-2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1-2 Cor.	1-2 Corinthians	1-2 Pet.	1-2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1-3 John	1-3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

INTRODUCTION

I wrote this commentary in the same way that I preach. Scripture exists only for the formation of a people in faith and love, and scholarly work is meant to support that formation. As a Christian preacher, I read scripture in an effort to discover Christ, and having discovered him, I then try to present him anew to his people. This is a fraught task. Often Jesus hides himself, or I think I've discovered him but then manage to lose him as I try to pivot from reading to preaching. More often, Christian interpreters would say, he discovers us, despite our best intentions and worst failures. But I wrote this commentary on the assumption that its readers would, like me, have a Bible open to the pertinent psalm and would be hunting for Jesus there, with hopes of presenting him to other people for their edification and the world's blessing.

That's a lot of assumptions! And it is different than the way I was taught scripture or, I wager, the way you were taught scripture. I was taught to listen to the Old Testament (or the Hebrew Bible or any number of other aliases folks keep proposing) on "its own terms," in "its own voice," a number of metaphors meant to say we read it without reference to Jesus.¹ Perhaps later, say, in a preaching class, we might learn how to relate this text to Jesus (but usually not there either—where did teachers of preaching learn how to interpret scripture?).² This end run around

1. Stephen Fowl points out the way modern scholars tend to resort to metaphors like these and rarely unpack them when defending anti-christological interpretation. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 185.

2. Nicholas Lash's image is unforgettable: we speak as though interpretation is a relay race, with the biblical scholars on the first leg. The problem is the baton never actually gets passed. Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 79.

christological interpretation is understandable and defensible even on Christian grounds (Ellen Charry gives a beautiful defense in her volume on the first third of the Psalter in this series).³ And sometimes that works out just fine; the psalms are a rich feast—folks can get fed without too much worry over what utensils we use. But other times it produces oddities, even absurdities. How is it that Christian interpreters of the psalms end up saying that we shouldn't interpret the psalms the way the New Testament does? As every opening Bible class hammers home on the first day, the collection of books we call the "Old Testament" was the only Bible that the first Christians knew. So they found the Messiah in Pss. 2 and 110, Jesus prayed the twenty-second and thirty-first psalms from his cross, and Jesus told his disciples that the psalms were written about him and must be fulfilled (Luke 24:44). What argument do we have against reading these psalms christologically? That the New Testament is *wrong* as it depicts Jesus teaching how to read Israel's Psalter? What if, on the contrary, *Jesus is actually teaching us how to read*? These New Testament passages aren't, then, awkward misunderstandings born of understandable piety but not to be repeated; they are rather signs for how Jesus wants his people to read his scriptures.

I offer here what we might call a "christologically maximalist" interpretation of the psalms. I offer a longer defense of this way of reading elsewhere,⁴ but for now we might address a few common and legitimate objections. First, why bother reading the Old Testament with reference to Jesus? Why not just read the New Testament? The answer is that it is delightful to find Jesus where we had not expected to find him. The motion of christological exegesis is from befuddlement ("this passage makes no sense") to slow illumination ("wait, I think I see the contours of God in Christ even here") to delight ("wow, the Lord was in this place and we didn't know it!"). This is the same motion of every sermon, of every soul, of every particle of the created universe: We expect initially that we are on our own, without meaning, and lost. We find that, in fact, God has already come close, even here. And then with delight we wish to preach about this, evangelize with it, do social justice with it, and most importantly, offer praise to God for it. The disciplines of discerning Christ in the Old Testament and discerning Christ throughout creation are braided together. Once we lose one, we lose the other—and the Old Testament becomes a foreign and forbidden place for Christians;

3. Ellen Charry, *Psalms 1–50*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), xix, xxi.

4. Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), esp. chaps. 2–3.

creation becomes simply a commodity that can be bought, sold, chopped up, and ruined. No. Both are made by God and are being used by God to renew all things.

The second common objection is whether this way of reading is supersessionist and lops off Israel's pride of place as God's beloved. The answer there is yes, it often has been and done precisely that. And no, it never should have and never should again. I try here to read in as philo-Jewish a way as possible. There is no necessary reason for allegory to be anti-Jewish, or for readings that bless Israel to be only the non-allegorical kind. The pervasiveness of this critique is a particularly long-lasting trope of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and modernity: to let someone read supraliterally will mean bad things will happen. You might find Mary in 2 Chronicles somewhere (the Reformation) or you'll do something unreasonable like discern the Trinity or the church where they logically cannot be (the Enlightenment) or you'll do violence to the original and necessarily non-Christian nature of the text (modernity). The shrillness of the opposition lets you know immediately that the arguments are suspect. The way to read without doing violence to Israel is to read without doing violence to Israel. The answer to curses is blessings. I try to read here in a way that is maximally catholic and maximally Jewish—as universal and as particular as possible. I do this because the psalms do this. They insist that Israel is the apple of God's eye and that through Israel God means to bless God's entire creation. The answer to the church's massive and nearly⁵ unforgivable failure to read in ways that bless Israel is to do it better, not to abandon the effort. I assume the church will go on reading the Bible for worship. Wouldn't it be beneficial if we had resources with which to read our own Bibles, the Old and New Testaments, in ways that honor the text and honor our neighbors—especially our older siblings in faith? Whether I've succeeded here is up to others, but not merely to scholars. The fruit of biblical interpretation is the life of the worshipping community. If the church can read this commentary and become more faithful in its love for Israel and for the planet and most importantly for God, then it was worth the time. If not, hopefully God will be merciful.

I feel grateful and delighted to have gotten to interpret this last third of the Psalter, 101–150, minus an extensive treatment of 119, which Reinhard Hüter will write in a separate volume. I get some of the most important psalms of all: 118, absolutely crucial for the church's life and preaching and worship and self-understanding; 121, key in Christians' piety; 137 with its troublesome blessings; the crescendo of praise in 145–150. This section of the Psalter covers Israel's

5. I am inclined to excise the "nearly." But God's mercy is unfathomable. And Israel has resources for forgiveness that constantly surprise and delight.

attempts to return from exile and so offers wisdom crucial for the church's understanding of the gathering-in of the Gentiles. I get the ascent psalms, 120–134, with their tutoring of our praises as it instructs pilgrims walking up Mount Zion. I get meaty historical psalms among the first ten or so and then the final section of psalms attributed to David in 139–144. And I only get 100,000 words in this manuscript to work with. This seemed entirely too many before I started, now entirely too few. It works out to roughly 140 words per verse—pleasingly brief.⁶ I remember before starting seminary asking my mentor, to whom this book is dedicated, whether we would have a course on every book of the Bible. It seemed rational to me—how could I preach on something I hadn't studied? He managed to repress a laugh at my mathematical inattention. No, he said, but we teach you how to interpret different sorts of scripture. So it is with Jesus and his Psalter—he teaches us how to read. I try here to read in as christological a manner as I can. Sometimes I will fail—the results won't fit with the words on the page, the theology of the church, the blessing of Israel, or the world. Then, by all means, leave my interpretation behind. But sometimes, I hope, my work might succeed in fitting beautifully with the words, the tradition, and the needs of God's people today.

I comment here in conversation with ancient interpreters (Augustine above all but not only), homiletical interpreters (like the great C. H. Spurgeon), and contemporary historical critics (some with greater faith friendliness and some with slightly less). Ancient interpreters would give anything for just some of the technical skills we can now take for granted in manuscript reconciliation, translation, and knowledge of historical background—they often complain about the limitations they face in each area. Yet their interpretations often succeed precisely where modern ones fail: they're interesting. Modern interpreters, with access to much correct information, are often boring. The difference is in whether one interprets the text with reference to God. Ancients do that. The ancients often fail, Lord knows, and not just for technical deficiencies beyond their ability but also for moral or theological reasons. Yet they often succeed in the thing that matters most—they bring delight in God to their hearers.

The church is in, among other things, a multigenerational argument over how to read scripture for the sake of a faithful life together. I do not propose by any

6. I gave some thought to spending more words on psalms that appear in the Revised Common Lectionary for the sake of preachers more likely to need help there than on psalms not so assigned. I decided against it, partly because there are resources for those already (e.g., Van Harn and Strawn 2009). But I also assume we should be preaching the breadth of scripture beyond the already wide bounds of the lectionary. A psalm is scripture—the word of God—even if the church neglects it.

means these are the only conversation partners valid for such a debate. They are just the ones I used with my limited time and ability. The goal in this raucous conversation is love of God and the blessing of the world.⁷ May the one who is enthroned on the praises of Israel make it so.

7. Herbert McCabe, *God, Christ, and Us*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2005), 115.

PSALM 101

We see in Psalm 101 a glimpse of the way Christ reigns. What do we who participate in that reign, serving this king (101:6), stand to learn here about the peculiar nature of his kingdom?

Historians tell us that this psalm has some elements of a wisdom psalm and some of a royal psalm. Like the very first psalm, this one also sets out two ways: one of life, with promise of great reward, and the other of death, with just as sure destruction. The psalm comes from the mouth of a king, not only in the superscription's attribution to David, but also in the promises about the specific ways to rule. It is no surprise for Christians that wisdom and royalty are present in the same psalm, since Christ our King is Wisdom incarnate.

But if Christ is the “I” in this psalm, why then does it offer a choice between good and ill? What does Christ have to “study” and learn about the “way that is blameless” (101:2)? Why does Christ need to promise not to put before his eyes “anything that is base” (101:3)? What need does the sovereign Lord of the universe have for *others* to minister to him (101:6)? Even more troubling, why does he pledge to slay every morning “all the wicked in the land” (101:8)?

In his incarnation, the Son of God *did* learn and grow, and therefore must also have studied and struggled. “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered,” Heb. 5:8 suggests, and the Gospel of Luke describes Jesus’s growth “in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52). Jesus did undergo temptation. His holiness was hard-earned and required the sorts of promise-keeping demonstrated in Ps. 101 and promise-making that all others must learn to imitate. Our head—Jesus—*currently* reigns. His members—all

of us—have yet to join fully in his holy way of ruling. With this psalm we pledge to do so.

It seems immodest to say the church reigns. Yet we do—and so we must promise to do so virtuously. The long list of interior dispositions here is our way of being among a kingdom of priests. Our interior struggles may seem small to us, but the psalm suggests they take place on a grand historical stage. Our efforts to keep our eyes pure, our heads bowed, our mouths from slander are part of our participation in Christ's reign over the cosmos now. One day that reign will be universally acknowledged, when every knee shall bow (Phil. 2:5–11). John Howard Yoder, in an appropriately named essay “To Serve Our God and Rule the World,” argued that as Christians we can be against militarism but not against triumphalism.¹ Why? The scriptures themselves are triumphalist. We are a kingdom of priests serving our God forever. No wonder the stakes are high in keeping our hearts dedicated solely to God.

This is not just an eschatological claim. Everyone has some power, however small, in this present world. The question is whether that power will be exercised well, for the sake of human flourishing, or selfishly, for aggrandizement of self and belittlement of others. James Mays tells the story of a ruler in the seventeenth century, a Duke Ernest the Pious of Saxe-Gotha, who would send this psalm to one of his underlings if that one failed to rule properly. It was said when such a one would act afoul that “he will surely receive the Duke's psalm to read” (Mays 1994: 322).² The psalm affirms something modern politics have generally denied: the state of the leader's soul matters for the way she or he performs the work of authority. We all have a stake in the faithfulness of those “over” us, for which we pray. And, as those who exercise responsibility over others, we had better tend the gardens of our own souls before we lift a finger in authority.

Psalms 101 opens with a promise to sing of “loyalty” and “justice.” The English words lack some of the texture of a good, chewy Hebrew word. “Loyalty” is a translation of *hesed*, with its broader implications of covenant righteousness and dogged commitment to Israel. The refrain of Psalms 118 and 136 that “his *hesed* endures forever” is sometimes translated as “steadfast love” (NRSV), or “mercy” elsewhere, as in the King James. “Justice” is a translation of *mishpat*, again a richer word in Hebrew. Here is a vein of great biblical depth: the prophets demand

1. John Howard Yoder, “To Serve Our God and Rule the World,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 128–40.

2. If there is one commentary I will lean on more than any other in this book, this is it—informed by historical criticism but beholden primarily to the faith of the church and its preaching ministry.

justice from God's people. We are to "seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow," as Isa. 1:17 demands. It is *mishpat* that is to roll down like waters, words from Amos 5:24 that the civil rights movement made famous over again, and *mishpat* that the prophet Micah insists God expects from us (Mic. 6:8). Cassiodorus said of his Latin version of the two words that open this psalm, "Here the totality is told briefly but fully, for in these two words all the Lord's works and the building up of the entire church are clearly told" (*Expositions of the Psalms* 100.1, in Wesselschmidt 2007: 206).

St. Augustine and his Reformation student Martin Luther both find a glimpse of the gospel in the twinning of judgment and mercy. Mercy and justice are only together in the communion of the saints. In hell, justice reigns alone. Luther concludes, "If we know ourselves, we easily sing of judgment; but if we know God we easily sing of mercy."³ Augustine imagines the pairing of justice and grace as a glimpse of two successive temporal eras. Now we are under an era of grace. An era of justice or judgment is coming (Augustine 2003: 29–30). It is important to note that Christians often imagine now as a time of grace compared to the old covenant's *past* time of justice. Yet Augustine says something different. Now is still the time of mercy, but judgment is coming, before which all human beings should tremble.

In the meantime, "I will study the way that is blameless. When shall I attain it?" (101:2). It would seem odd that Christ would pledge to study and even long to know when he will reach blamelessness. Sinners long for an absent holiness, but Christ himself is the source of holiness. So why this lament? Augustine imagines Christ, the whole Christ, head and members this way: "He is still dying in you, as you have already risen in him" (2003: 33). We are all the members of Christ on earth. He dies with and for and in us. We are joined to our head, who is already at the right hand of the Father. In him, we too have risen. This nimble body of Christ stretches across the cosmos and the eons. It "explains" Christ's ongoing suffering among us and our certain victory in him. This kind of plaintive cry by Christ on our behalf is a glimpse of the mystery of salvation, in which God gives us all his glory in Christ and receives in exchange all our need. In us, Christ too longs for holiness. In him, even we find it. This prayer gives meaning to our efforts at study. We long for wisdom and holiness. In Christ we will find both.

Augustine (2003: 33–36) finds in this longing for holiness a key to not reading the psalm as a rationale for distancing oneself from those who are less holy. If

3. Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Psalms II*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bauman, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 11 of *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1976), 283.

God distanced himself from the unholy, God would have no followers left! The longing for holiness is good. Yet Jesus eats with sinners and refuses to separate himself from humanity. With this psalm we can pray for the removal of blame. And knowing what we know of the compromised nature of all human community, we can be patient with the sinners still in our midst, who teach us patience and grace. For Christ is the only blameless one.

The psalmist seeks blamelessness throughout. Mays describes blamelessness as “coherence” and “consistency” with “some fundamental value” (1994: 321). A similar passage comes in Ps. 18:20–30, where the psalmist acclaims, “With the blameless you show yourself blameless” (18:25). The opposite of such blamelessness is a twisted and incoherent heart. This psalm is concerned with character, human nature in its deepest depths, the right ordering of which allows us to minister to God himself. Without a blameless character, we serve only ourselves—which is chaos indeed (Mays 1994: 322).

The psalm ends jarringly, with a promise to slay evildoers every morning. Interpreters as early as Origen notice this oddity and insist that no Christian reader can take the promise literally (*Against Celsus* 7.19, in Wesselschmidt 2007: 208). Not even the most bloodthirsty ruler has executions every morning! We might say that such a promise shows God’s impatience with lies, pride, and deceit. God cuts such things off every single day. Luther reads the reference tropologically: morning is the new start God brings daily, without the stain of the day before. Morning is a glimpse of the resurrection to come. Luther suggests the liars and deceivers are like the babies of Ps. 139, the whining desires and resentments that have to be nipped in the bud or they will ruin us spiritually.

More positively, we might say this promise from God gives hope. We should all long to be sheared of lies. But we cannot do it ourselves. God can, and promises to do so one morning, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps on resurrection day, when all things shall be made new.

One overzealous NRSV study Bible notation worries about this verse. Though its meaning is “probably” not literal, “religious fanatics have taken it literally and do so still” (Harrelson 2003: 843). Sure enough. But the answer to “wrong” readings is *better* ones. Morning is the time of God’s new mercy, of Christ’s resurrection, of the dawn of the kingdom, when untruth shall end. This king promises to bring that day by his might. Those who love truth, including true biblical interpretation, will long for that kingdom to come soon.

The college town where I served a church has a vibrant set of campus ministries. Perhaps it’s because we’re still a remnant of Christendom. North Carolinians

who go to that state school usually grew up in a church. You can ask a stranger here *where*, not *whether*, they go to church. The school also hitched its wagon to the horse of the green economy early on. Sustainable development and energy programs are important on campus, and environmental activism is held in high regard. These two cultures—campus ministry and environmentalist zeal—exist uneasily alongside one another. In the campus ministry with which I’m most familiar, disciple-making and ecological sensitivity seem to compete for space. Students who are convinced that all people should shun Styrofoam and eat organic and local food feel that the church is the problem for our endangered ecology. Students more interested in being and making disciples feel that ecology is a side issue and can become its own form of snobbery (“You make your own clothes? Well, I never ride in a car!”).

Psalms 101 speaks to this impasse—one likely to grow as contentiousness over climate change worsens. The psalmist—in our reading Jesus—praises *both* God’s covenant-bound love and God’s other-oriented mercy, both God’s *hesed* and God’s *mishpat*. There is not a moment of pause between them, and one requires the other. In our world, we can become fascinated with one at the expense of the other, as though righteousness (“Let’s save the planet!”) disqualifies mercy (“Let’s tell others about Jesus!”) or vice versa. But for the Bible, these two cannot be uncoupled from one another without disastrous results. Discipleship means we love the world that God loved into being, took flesh in, and died to save. Love for God’s world also means we proclaim his gospel to all creatures. May the God of the scriptures sew back together these two that we have often ripped apart.