





## INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS 51-150

The Old Testament Book of Psalms has always played an important role in the life of the church, as it still does today. It is one of the best known and most often cited books of the Bible. Select psalms have provided the basis for some familiar and well-loved hymns, such as Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress," which is based on Psalm 46. The Psalms have pervaded much of the daily life of the church, providing the words of common, daily prayers, such as Psalm 118:1, "O give thanks to the Lord for he is good and his mercy endures forever." Psalms, such as Psalm 23 have provided words of comfort and hope for many Christians during times of distress, illness, and bereavement. The Psalms remain a prominent feature of church liturgies in the form of the psalmody or the words of Introits and Graduals in worship services. The universal appeal of the Psalms may be summarized succinctly in the words of Johanna Manley:



Now the prophets teach one thing, historians another, the law something else, and the form of advice found in the proverbs something different still. But the Book of Psalms has taken over what is profitable for all. It foretells coming events; it recalls history; it frames laws for life; it suggests what must be done; and in general, it is the common treasury of good doctrine, carefully finding what is suitable for each one. The old wounds of souls it cures completely, and to the recently wounded it brings speedy improvements; the diseased it treats, the unharmed it preserves. On the whole it effaces, as far as possible, the passions, which subtly exercise dominion over souls during the lifetime of man, and it does this with a certain orderly persuasion and sweetness which produces sound thoughts.<sup>1</sup>

Horace D. Hummel writes, "It is almost redundant to underscore the importance of the Psalter, whether in contemporary life or in the history of the church . . . whether in public worship or in private devotion."<sup>2</sup>

The popularity of psalms in Christianity goes back to Jesus Christ himself, who quoted them on a number of occasions in regard to important moments in his ministry. Lee M. McDonald has rightly observed, "in the life and teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, the Psalms are cited more times than any of the other books of the Old Testament."<sup>3</sup> In response to the second temptation in the wilderness in Matthew 4:6, Jesus quoted Psalm 91:11, 12. When Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why

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<sup>1</sup>Johanna Manley, ed. *Grace for Grace: The Psalter and the Holy Fathers* (Menlo Park, CA: Monastery Books, 1992 [repr. 1996]), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Horace D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh: An Introduction to the Origin, Purpose, and Meaning of the Old Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), p. 404.

<sup>3</sup>Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*. Revised and Expanded Edition (Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 100.

have you forsaken me” (Mt 27:46 and Mk 15:34), he was quoting directly Psalm 22:1a.; and when he said, “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Lk 23:46), he was quoting Psalm 31:5. The giving of sour wine to Jesus on the cross was a fulfillment of the prophecy given in Psalm 69:21. Psalm 69:9a was quoted in John’s account of Jesus’ cleansing the temple in 2:17.

E. Earle Ellis observes, “Jesus and the New Testament writers give a prominent place to the Old Testament in the formulation of their teachings. Like other Jewish groups, they concentrate their biblical quotations on certain portions of the Scriptures, especially the Pentateuch, Isaiah, and the Psalms, and they employ them more in some New Testament books than in others.”<sup>4</sup> According to H. B. Swete, the psalms are quoted forty times in the New Testament.<sup>5</sup>

The psalms were very well known and abundantly quoted by the early church fathers.<sup>6</sup> Johanna Manley remarks, “The Church Fathers, full of wisdom, all show enormous respect and honour for the great Prophet David. Their writings, including those of the other prophets, such as Isaiah, are thoroughly laced with the Psalms.”<sup>7</sup> Jerome advised Paula, a monastic-minded, noble Roman woman, to begin her study of Scripture by learning the Psalter first and then proceeding to the other books of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> When reading the church fathers and paying special attention to their citations of Scripture, one is struck by the abundance of and facility with which quotations occur, almost in a rapid-fire fashion.

The early church found the Psalms useful in a number of ways. They enriched the liturgical life of the church, serving both as hymns and as one of the Scripture readings. The prophetic nature of many psalms helped to substantiate the veracity of the church’s teachings, especially regarding the essential nature of the Son of God and the messianic role of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the human race. The psalms, as well as the Old Testament generally, were often used to validate the teachings expressed in what eventually became the New Testament canon. Along with other books of the Old Testament they were used to defend orthodox Christian teachings over against heretical innovations. Since the early Christians lived in an often hostile world which advocated and lived an ungodly lifestyle, the Psalms were often used to support and encourage Christian morality. John F. Brug sees a twofold use of the Psalms when he says, “Psalms is the hymnbook of the Bible. . . . Psalms is also the prayer book of the Bible.”<sup>9</sup> Along these lines, “[Martin] Luther suggested that the psalms could be divided into five main types: (1) messianic psalms which speak of Christ . . . (2) teaching psalms which emphasize doctrine . . . (3) comfort psalms . . . (4) psalms of prayer and petition . . . and (5) thanksgiving psalms.”<sup>10</sup>

Regarding the liturgical use of the Psalms one can possibly go as far back as Pliny the Younger, who, as a

<sup>4</sup>E. Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), p. 77.

<sup>5</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup>Graham W. Woolfenden in “The Use of the Psalter by Early Monastic Communities” in *Studia Patristica*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone, vol. 26 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1993), p. 89, notes that use among the apostolic fathers was not consistent, with 1 Clement quoting the Psalms more frequently than Polycarp, Barnabas, or Ignatius. The Psalms are referred to more extensively in the apologists like Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, and still more in Origen who wrote commentaries on the Psalms.

<sup>7</sup>Manley, *Grace for Grace*, p. iii.

<sup>8</sup>See Jerome *Ep.* 107.12.

<sup>9</sup>John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 1-72* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 16.

newly appointed Roman governor in Bithynia, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan for instructions on how to handle the persecution of Christians in his province. In his letter, he gives a brief description of Christian worship. One liturgical feature he observed was that the Christians were accustomed to assemble on the first day of the week and “*carmen . . . dicere secum invicem*” (to sing a song antiphonally).<sup>11</sup> Given Pliny’s limited understanding of Christianity, it is very possible that *carmen* could refer to a selection from the Psalms.

At the beginning of the third century Tertullian is another witness to the liturgical use of the Psalms. *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* cites the following testimony from this author: “[Tertullian] describes similar practices at the agape: ‘After the washing of hands and the lighting of lamps, each is urged to come into the middle and sing to God, either from sacred scriptures or from his own invention (*de proprio ingenio*).’”<sup>12</sup> The liturgical use of the psalms increased with the growth of the church in the fourth century: “The Constantinian Settlement (313) provided the opportunity for much larger assemblies to meet, with consequent changes to the ordering and content of services, and the rise of desert and (especially) urban monasticism provided a renewed focus on the reciting and singing of biblical Psalms that became a regular feature of Eucharistic services.”<sup>13</sup> However, later in the fourth and early fifth centuries there was some question as to whether or not the Eucharistic psalm was to be sung or read as one of the Scripture lessons. Athanasius forbade the new melodic style of singing a psalm while Ambrose encouraged it; Augustine was somewhat undecided but grudgingly accepted the singing of a psalm.<sup>14</sup>

At this same time there is clear evidence of the importance of psalms in the worship and vigils of the monastic communities. Near the end of the fourth century we have the following information about religious life and observances of the church year in the Middle East by a Western nun, Egeria: “From then [before cock-crow] until daybreak they [monks and virgins] join in singing the refrains to the hymns, psalms, and antiphons.”<sup>15</sup> Then, in the early fifth century John Cassian gives the following description of the Desert Fathers in Egypt: “As they were going to celebrate their daily rites and prayers, one rose up in the midst to chant the Psalms to the Lord, and while they were all sitting (as is still the custom in Egypt), with their minds intently fixed on the words of the chanter when he had sung eleven Psalms, separated by prayers introduced between them, verse after verse being evenly enunciated, he finished the twelfth with a response of Alleluia, and then, by his sudden disappearance from the eyes of all, put an end at once to their discussion of their service.”<sup>16</sup>

Of much greater importance was the use of the Psalms in support of the church’s teachings. Lee M. McDonald notes: “The theology of the New Testament was without question firmly grounded in references to Old Testament texts that were believed to support the church’s messianic claims about Jesus as

<sup>11</sup>Epp. 10 (ad Trajan 96).

<sup>12</sup>Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, eds. *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 770. Tertullian’s quotation comes from his *Apologeticum* 39:17-18. The reference to singing “from sacred scriptures” surely refers to the Psalms.

<sup>13</sup>Wainwright and Tucker, *Oxford History of Christian Worship*, p. 770.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, p. 775.

<sup>15</sup>Egeria *Pilgrimage of Egeria* 24. Quoted from James F. White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretative Sources* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 85.

<sup>16</sup>*Institutes* 2, 3, 5-6 (NPNF 2 11:205, 207), quoted from White, *Documents of Christian Worship*, pp. 88-89.

well as their support for Christian conduct. That is beyond dispute.”<sup>17</sup> Later he observes, “The Christian use of the Old Testament was highly selective and designed especially to clarify or confirm Christian belief. . . . The most common way the Old Testament was appealed to by the Christian community in their first hundred years was by using it primarily, though not exclusively, as a predictive book.”<sup>18</sup> Psalms 22 and 69 describe most fully the suffering of Christ. His rejection by the leaders of Israel was predicted in Psalm 118:22, and his being mocked and jeered during his suffering was foretold in Psalm 22:8. Psalms 41:9 and 55:12-14 speak of his being betrayed by a friend (Judas). Jesus’ being given vinegar to drink was prophesied in Psalm 69:21, and that his clothes would be divided by lot in Psalm 22:18. His resurrection from the dead was foretold in Psalm 16:10 and his everlasting reign as priest and king in Psalm 110.<sup>19</sup> Such Old Testament prophecies served to validate Jesus as the promised messiah: “The messianic psalms have great value as a testimony to Christ. Only the four gospels and perhaps Isaiah surpass the psalms as sources of information about the feelings, words, and deeds of Christ while he was on earth, carrying out his work as our Savior.”<sup>20</sup>

On the basis of the patristic evidence there is no doubt that, within the Old Testament canon, the Psalms played a very prominent role in the church’s confirmation of her teachings, which were initially transmitted orally in the apostolic and post-apostolic proclamation. The first written Scriptures for the church was the Old Testament. But as the New Testament books were written, disseminated, and acknowledged as canonically authoritative, the church went back to the Old Testament to confirm the teachings initially grounded in the apostolic tradition but increasingly based on the New Testament. This was essential since the development of doctrine and recognition of the New Testament canon were not consecutive but concurrent developments. The Psalms clearly played a crucial role in this process.

The early church also saw the need to emphasize the unity of the Old and the New Testament, especially in the second century when the Gnostics and Marcion denigrated the Old Testament as being written by an inferior, if not an evil, deity and that its message was not compatible with that of the New Testament.<sup>21</sup> Since Marcion designated his own New Testament canon (a shortened version of the Gospel of Luke and ten Pauline letters, not including the three pastoral letters), the early church saw the need to show a relation between the Old Testament and the New Testament in their entirety. Two ways of doing this were to point out the similarity of messages in the Old and the New Testament and to demonstrate that the New Testament authors quoted extensively from the Old Testament. This would also demonstrate that the author of both Testaments were not different deities but one and the same God.

Closely associated with this was the need for the church to counter the various Trinitarian, christological, and anthropological heresies. The Psalms played a prominent role in refuting these heresies. In response to the Gnostic belief that the visible, material world was created evil by the Demiurge, a defective god or aeon, the early fathers emphasized that the world was created good by the only true, triune God.

<sup>17</sup>McDonald, *Formation*, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 119-120.

<sup>19</sup>Brug, *Commentary*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>21</sup>See David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 45.

And in response to Gnostic and docetic views of the human nature of the incarnate Christ, which denied the reality of his human nature, they turned to quotations which clearly affirmed that his human nature was consubstantial with ours, with the exception of sin. Very helpful in this regard were the psalms which speak of a suffering Messiah, such as Psalms 22 and 69.

When the Trinitarian heresies arose, namely, subordinationism, modalism, Arianism, and Macedonianism or Pneumatomachianism, it was necessary to see testimonies of three persons in one Godhead in the Old Testament and certainly in the Psalms. Since the Psalms were considered prophecy and David was one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, they were greatly relied upon to prove the veracity of the New Testament teachings regarding Jesus Christ, especially the facts of his life and the truthfulness of his message. Bertrand de Margerie has made the following two comments regarding Hilary of Poitiers, “. . . he [Hilary], along with all other Fathers of the Church, held that the entire Old Testament—and most particularly the Psalms—is for the most part Christological,”<sup>22</sup> and “in scrutinizing the Psalms, for instance, Hilary constantly seeks their prophetic inner meaning, ceaselessly examines them in the light of Paul’s Letters (cf. Rom 2:16), while discovering in the Psalms an adumbration of Christ’s actions and passions.”<sup>23</sup> Concerning Jerome he says, “For any serious reader of Jerome’s commentaries on the Old Testament, and particularly the Psalms, knows full well that the exegetical approach reflected in these writings is essentially Christocentric.”<sup>24</sup>

In order to refute the christological heresies, namely, Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, and Monophysitism, they quoted Psalm verses which supported both his divine nature and his human nature, as well as the relation of the two natures in one person. Of course, these were controversies in regard to which the Psalms would seem to make less specific statements. But there are quotations which speak of the Son’s equality with and eternal generation from the Father, his personal distinction from the Father, and his incarnation.

When Pelagianism arose at the beginning of the fifth century, the church fathers spent a considerable amount of ink proving the reality of original sin, that it originated with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and was transmitted to every single one of their descendents in the human race. To counter this heresy, they found ample proof throughout the Psalms. The early fathers are firmly convinced that the Psalms, especially Psalm 51, very clearly attest to the reality of original sin and that it, along with actual sins, must be forgiven in order for believers to inherit eternal life. While there was a definite legal tendency in the early church, there are clear references to the Psalms in support of divine grace and that God is the source of salvation.

Prayer has always been an important part of the life of the church. As noted above, John F. Brug sees the Psalms as the prayer book of the Bible, and Martin Luther considered one division of the Psalms as prayers and petitions. Fittingly then, the early fathers find in the Psalms numerous examples of prayers and also guidelines for prayer, such as the best time to pray, frequency of prayer, the attitude with which one should pray, and the confidence that God will hear the prayers of his people.

<sup>22</sup>Bertrand de Margerie, SJ, *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis*, 3 vols. (Petersham, MA: Saint Bede’s Publications, 1995), 2:54.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 2:54.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 2:125.

Another frequent use of the Psalms was as a source of moral directives. Christian morality had always been an important theme of early Christian literature, beginning with the hortatory genre, which preceded the apologetic and polemical genres. This may be due partially to the legalistic bent of much patristic writings, but also because of the difficulty of living a truly God-pleasing life in a world dominated by secularism and a plurality of religions. The Psalms are frequently quoted to encourage people to be merciful in imitation of their merciful God, to guard against pride and a desire for vengeance, to be patient in hardships, and to be generous in helping the poor. These early writers find in the Psalms the quandary of trying to answer the perennially imponderable question of why the wicked seem to prosper in this world while the righteous seem to suffer and often lack even basic temporal goods. In attempting to answer this puzzle, they strongly advise people against placing their trust in material possessions and remind their readers that the ungodly who seem to prosper now will eventually be punished for their wickedness and lack of faith. The Book of Psalms firmly asserts that God is a God of judgment who will not let sin go unpunished, if not always in this life, certainly on the day of judgment and in the next life.

In working through citations from the Psalms in early Christian literature, we are struck by the prominent place the Psalms had in the life of the early church, as a source of defense against false teachings, as a fountain of moral guidelines, as a source of comfort in affliction, and as a solid foundation for the Christian hope of eternal life. Readers of patristic literature are amazed with the way in which numerous passages from the Psalms and other Old Testament books are employed in support of a particular point of doctrine. With few books and without modern-day reference resources they had to depend on their memory, which was cultivated much more extensively in the ancient world than it is today. Graham W. Woolfenden asks why the Psalter became such a dominant source of meditational material, more so than any other book of the Bible in the monastic communities and then quotes Abba Philimon who said, when asked why he preferred the Psalms to other parts of Scripture: "God has impressed the power of the psalms on my poor soul as He did on the soul of the prophet David. I cannot be separated from the sweetness of the visions about which they speak: they embrace all Scriptures."<sup>25</sup> The idea that the Psalms were a kind of condensation of all Scripture may have led to the emphasis on memorization of the Psalms. We have already referred to Jerome's advice to Paula. Woolfenden adds to this,

Pachomius required the learning of "at least the New Testament and the Psalter." The late fifth century *Regula Orientalis* expected praying and psalmody whilst at work or on a journey, which would imply memorization in a world of few books. The same work expected postulants to learn the Lord's Prayer and as many psalms as they are able, whilst waiting to be admitted. It is now thought that Benedict's concern for *Lectio Divina* was also to do with memorizing psalms and as late as 787, bishops were expected by Nicaea II to know the Psalter by heart.<sup>26</sup>

In commenting on Psalm 1 and comparing the benefit of the Psalms to the rest of the Bible, Basil the Great said, "the Book of Psalms encompasses the benefit of them all. It foretells what is to come and memorializes history; it legislates for life, gives advice on practical matters, and serves in general as a repository of

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<sup>25</sup>Woolfenden, "Use of the Psalter," p. 91.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

good teachings, carefully searching out what is suitable for each individual."<sup>27</sup>

Christians in the twenty-first century still find the Psalms a great source of inspiration, comfort, guidance, and a real wellspring of the doctrinal truths which lead to eternal salvation. It is hoped that in some small way readers of the excerpts in this volume will have their spiritual lives greatly enriched.

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<sup>27</sup>Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 92.