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The Christian Interpretation of the Psalms

S. B. FROST

OF all the books of the Old Testament the Psalter has undoubtedly meant most to the Christian. For nineteen centuries it has been his hymn-book and the offices of the Church were built around it. Among the reformed Churches, the Anglican works steadily through the whole Psalter each month at Morning and Evening Prayer, and those of the Presbyterian tradition still give pride of place to the Metrical Psalms. The hymn-books of all the Churches owe far more to the Psalter than most of those who use them recognize. Whether we sing *Praise my soul the King of Heaven*, or *All people that on earth do dwell* or *O God our Help in ages past*, we are still being guided in our worship by the inspiration of the Hebrew psalmists.

There is, however, a profound theological difference in some versions of the psalms as compared with others. If we take the best known of all the psalms as our illustration, we can chant the Prayer Book prose version: *The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing*, or we can sing the metrical version: *The Lord's my shepherd; I'll not want*, and both are straight-forward translations. A third version is that by George Herbert: *The God of love my shepherd is*. This deftly expounds the original thoughts and clothes them in words of fresh beauty, chosen indeed from the common stock, but with a poet's sensitivity. It is aesthetically more satisfying, but like the prose translation and the metrical paraphrases it is content to re-express the original thoughts unchanged.

But when we come to another very familiar version, that of Henry Williams Baker, we are aware of a subtle but unmistakable difference:

In death's dark vale I fear no ill
With Thee, dear Lord, beside me;
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,
Thy cross before to guide me

The cup which runs over has become the chalice of the Eucharist, the table which is spread is the table of the Lord's supper, and the whole psalm has been deftly but effectively christianized. This tendency is taken still further in the little known but very lovely version of Charles Wesley of which I quote the third verse:

He in sickness makes me whole,
Guides into the paths of peace;
He revives my fainting soul,
Stablishes in righteousness:
Who for me vouchsafed to die,
Loves me still—I know not why!

It is quite clear that Baker and Wesley have, like George Herbert and the Westminster Divines, taken the psalm for their model, but unlike them they

have each produced a poem which is as distinctively Christian as the psalm is distinctively Hebrew. What is perhaps not so widely recognized is that Baker and Wesley were but expressing in verse the traditional Christian interpretation of the psalms. In his *Letter to Marcellinus*, Athanasius remarks:

If, again, you want to sing Psalms that speak especially about the Saviour, you will find something in almost all of them; but 45 and 110¹ relate particularly to His Divine Begetting from the Father and His coming in the flesh, while 22 and 69 foretell the holy cross and the grievous plots He bore and how great things He suffered for our sakes. The 3rd and 109th also display the snares and malice of the Jews and how Iscariot betrayed Him; 21, 50 and 72 all set Him forth as Judge and foretell His Second Coming in the flesh to us; they also show the Gentiles' call. The 16th shows His resurrection from the dead, in flesh, the 24th and 47th His ascension into heaven. And in the four psalms, 93, 96, 98 and 99, all the benefits deriving from the Saviour's passion are set forth together.

In Psalm 45, Athanasius finds a clear reference to the Annunciation:

Neither is the Psalmist silent about the fact that He should be born of a virgin—no, he underlines it straight away in Psalm 45 . . . "Hearken, O daughter," he says, "and see and incline thine ear, and forget thine own people and thy father's house. For the King has desired thy beauty and He is thy Lord." Is not this like what Gabriel said, "Hail, thou that art full of grace, the Lord is with Thee"? For the Psalmist, having called Him the Anointed One, that is, Messiah or Christ, forthwith declares His Human birth by saying, "Hearken, O daughter, and see"; the only difference being that Gabriel addresses Mary by an epithet, because he is of another race from her, while David fitly calls her his own daughter, because it was from him that she should spring.²

Athanasius could, of course, claim that in this interpretation of scripture he was but following in the footsteps of the New Testament writers themselves. Of the soldiers gambling for Jesus' tunic, St. John says: "This was to fulfil the Scripture: 'They parted my garments among them, and for my clothing did they cast lots,'" which is a reference to Psalm 22. St. Paul in the Epistle to the Ephesians misquotes Psalm 68 and understands it as referring to the Ascension: "When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives and gave gifts unto men." The Epistle to the Hebrews refers to Psalm 2: "Thou art my son, Today I have begotten thee," and again to Psalm 110: "Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek," and reads both as direct references to Jesus. Thus it is important to recognize that for the New Testament Church these psalms were not merely messianic, they were also Christological: that is, they not only pointed forward to the Messiah but definitely pointed to Jesus of Nazareth as that Messiah.

This remained true for the medieval exegetes and for those of the Reformation period. Miss Smalley has drawn our attention to Herbert of Bosham, who wrote his commentary at the end of the 12th or beginning of

1. The Hebrew enumeration of the Psalms is followed throughout this paper.

2. *St. Athanasius on the Psalms*, tr. by A Religious of C.S.M.V. (London, 1949), pp. 34, 14.

the 13th century.³ He was almost certainly a pupil of Master Andrew of St. Victor, who was himself very probably influenced by the rationalizing tendencies of Rashi. Herbert's view of Scripture is conditioned by the four senses but he disclaims any pretensions of dealing with the higher senses and of set purpose he limits himself to the literal. He writes: "I am not striving after an understanding of the difficult spiritual senses, but with the animals that walk the earth, I cleave to earth, attending only to the lowest sense of the letter of the Psalter." He was thus well aware of the possibility of a difference between the Christological and the literal interpretation of a psalm and it was the latter he was seeking. Nevertheless, so great is the domination of the traditional exegesis that he is often unable to free himself from it, or at least feels it impolitic to do so. His method was to set out the traditional Christological interpretation of a psalm, calling it the *expositio ecclesiastica*, and then to add an account of the literal (often Jewish) exposition, and he apparently wishes to be free to decide between them, though he does not always allow his preference to appear too clearly. I quote from Miss Smalley:

He may opt for the Christian and then proceed to set forth the Jewish on the pretext of showing how wrong it is. He may even, as on Psalm liv, contradict himself, saying first that according to the ecclesiastical exposition the psalm is a prophecy of the Passion and Resurrection; secondly that according to the literal sense it is a prayer of David against Achitophel and Doeg; thirdly, that "whatever the *litterator* may pretend, the psalm manifestly prophesies our King and Messiah and his betrayal by Judas."

In this case (Miss Smalley observes) "he is using 'the literal sense' ambiguously, contrasting it with what he takes to be the true sense. He cannot quite free himself from an inheritance of confused terminology."

I have been very glad to avail myself of Miss Smalley's research on Herbert because he illustrates our subject so admirably. When we turn to Luther, we get the impression that he is equally confused in his thinking on this matter, but does not wish to free himself from his inheritance. If we turn to Psalm 45, the one that meant so much to Athanasius, we find him dealing with v. 6, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever" as follows:

This passage not only teaches us that Christ is by nature true God, but also reminds us of His office, that of declaring the right and preserving order in His kingdom. . . . Since it is written that He is the fairest, and it is obvious that He is a man, it must follow that He is also mortal. Nevertheless, He is also eternal, since "Thy throne is eternal, O God." Now compare these with one another. The text states He is among the sons of men where death reigns, so he must necessarily die. Yet it says He will be eternal. Therefore the resurrection of the dead is deduced from this passage.⁴

Luther is too practical a man to refuse to recognize that the psalms must have had a contemporary meaning and he finds the words of v. 10 addressed

3. B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1952), pp. 186-195.

4. *Luther's Works* (St. Louis, 1957), Vol. 12, p. 230f.

both to old Israel and to the Church: "The Holy Spirit addresses the Church and synagogue in common." This passing recognition that the psalm had a contemporary meaning is significant in that it reminds us that the historical interpretation had never been entirely lost to sight.⁵ The titles given in the Hebrew Psalter may not be of much exegetical value, but at least they secured that the historical interpretation was not wholly obscured by the Christological. This reveals itself more clearly in Calvin's comments on the same psalm in which he emphasizes that it is an epithalamium and regards it as composed for the marriage of Solomon to an Egyptian princess. When, however, he meets details which he cannot easily interpret of Solomon, he gets out of the difficulty by falling back on the further application to Jesus as Messiah. Of v. 6 ("Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever") he remarks that the unseemliness of the application to Solomon shows that "the divine majesty of Christ, beyond all question, is expressly denoted here."⁶ The tendency to allow the historical interpretation more recognition also reveals itself in the general soberness of the prefaces to the psalms supplied by the translators of the King James' Version. At Psalm 2 we read indeed: "The Kingdom of Christ. Kings are exhorted to accept it"; and at Psalm 45: "The majesty and grace of Christ's Kingdom. The duty of the Church and the benefits thereof"; and at Psalm 110: "The Kingdom, the priesthood, the conquest and the passion of Christ"; but such psalms as 22 or 55 which might well have received a Christological interpretation are explained wholly in terms of the historical reference to David. Even so, Lowth in the eighteenth century still recognizes the Christological interpretation as existing validly alongside the historical, as the following quotation illustrates:

The subject of the second psalm is the establishment of David upon the throne. . . . The character which David sustains in this psalm is twofold, literal and allegorical. . . . If in the first reading of the Psalm we consider the character of David in the literal sense, the composition appears sufficiently perspicuous, and abundantly illustrated by facts from sacred history. . . . If we turn our minds to contemplate the internal sense, and apply the same passages to the allegorical David, a nobler series of events is presented to us and a meaning not only more sublime, but even more perspicuous rises to view. . . . If after having considered attentively the subjects apart, we examine them at length in a united view, the beauty and sublimity of this most elegant poem will be improved. We may then perceive the vast disparity of the two images, and yet the continual harmony and agreement that subsists between them . . . , so that either may pass for the original whence the other was copied.⁷

A commentary which maintained its popularity long into the 19th century was that of Bishop Horne, entitled *A commentary on the Book of Psalms, in which their literal or historical sense as they relate to King David and the people of Israel is illustrated; and their application to Messiah, to the*

5. Particularly by the Antiochene Fathers. On Theodore of Mopsuestia, cf. J. D. Wood, *The Interpretation of the Bible* (London, 1958), p. 60.

6. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh, 1846), Vol. II, p. 181.

7. *Lectures on Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Stowe (Andover, 1829), p. 91.

*Church and to Individuals as members thereof is pointed out, with a view to render the use of the Psalter pleasing and profitable to all orders and degrees of Christians.*⁸

The effect, however, of what we may justly term the Second or Liberal Reformation, from which period we are perhaps just beginning to emerge, has been strongly to discountenance any interpretation other than the literal. A review of commentaries written under the influence of that reformation shows not merely that the principle that the psalms had a meaning for the people of their own day is everywhere accepted as primary, but also that it is generally thought by commentators that once this meaning has been established the commentator's task is wholly fulfilled. Indeed I think we may say that no part of the Scriptures has changed its character in the hands of modern scholars so greatly as has the Psalter. For good or ill, we all of us sit at the feet of Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel. Gunkel taught us to see the psalms, not as uniformly one type of literary product, all monotonously and indistinguishably "psalms," but as exhibiting widely-differing characteristics, according as they originated from markedly different settings. Thus we have the various *Gattungen*: the Royal Psalms, the Enthronement Psalms, the Hymns, the Lament, the Thanksgiving, and so on. Mowinckel has emphasized that the majority if not all of these *Gattungen* have their *Sitz im Leben* in the cultus of the Jerusalem Temple, and modern commentators have necessarily worked from these accepted positions. It will be interesting to see therefore what a representative selection of commentaries make of the psalm on which we already have heard Athanasius, Luther and Calvin comment: Psalm 45, *Eruclavit cor meum* ("My heart is inditing a good matter").

Let us begin with the Anglican W. O. E. Oesterley.⁹ He writes: "That this psalm, if it may be so called, found a place in the Psalter, is to be explained on grounds similar to those which ultimately permitted the admission of the Song of Songs into the Canon. . . . The King who plays the leading part was conceived of as representing the Messiah, and the queen . . . as the Jewish people of the Messianic era." He then expounds the psalm in its original setting as an epithalamium, explaining the crucial v. 6 ("Thy throne, O God, . . .") as being due to divinizing tendencies in Israel's cultural milieu. He then ends by adding a single sentence: "The subject-matter of this psalm does not call for a section on religious teaching." One is left wondering what thoughts occupied Dr. Oesterley's mind at Morning Prayer on the ninth day of each month. Rudolf Kittel, who published his Commentary in 1929, was a Lutheran.^{9a} He begins:

The poem was applied in the Early Church to the Messiah. He is reckoned as the King of the Congregation, and so the Queen is the Congregation itself. . . .

8. First published in 1776 and reprinted over twenty times. John Wesley remarked: "I suppose it is the best that ever was wrote" (*Journal*, March 27, 1783), though he is critical of some details.

9. *The Psalms* (London, 1939).

9a. *Die Psalmen* (K.A.T.) 6th edit., Leipzig, 1929.

But this explanation has long since given way to the historical. . . . Today all are agreed that the marriage of a real King was the occasion of our poem. But we are indebted certainly to the allegorical exposition that the song has come down to us. Only with its protection could the compiler dare to take the poem into the Canon.

He then contents himself with explaining the psalm in its historical setting, and the Lutheran congregation is left no wiser than the Anglican. Artur Weiser is, I believe, a member of the Reformed Church, and I would like to include a Calvinist among my authorities. The Foreword to his Third Edition¹⁰ begins thus: "Compared with the first two editions, the Third Edition of this Commentary differs not only in that now all the Psalms are included, but also by reason of the attempt to define the place of psalm-composition and psalm-tradition, to make the results fruitful for the historical and theological exposition of the individual psalms." It is therefore with some hope that we turn to our Psalm 45. He begins rather depressingly: "The psalm is the solitary example of the secular song in the Psalter." He then interprets the psalm in its historical setting. He ends by remarking that the promise of the poet to immortalize the King's name would certainly not have been fulfilled had not "the Psalm already in olden times received a messianic reinterpretation, and thus understood found a place in the Psalter. . . . Certainly, this allegorical interpretation would not have been possible but for the high sense of moral and religious responsibility, which in the psalm itself continually shines through the dress of court-style, and lifts the sphere of the earthly and secular into the realm of religion." The Presbyterians are thus given a reminder of the moral issues of human affairs to aid their singing of the Metrical Psalms, but not, I think, the theological guidance which we were led by the Foreword to expect.

The commentary to which an increasing number of North American and British preachers will turn is the Interpreter's Bible¹¹. The exegesis of our psalm by W. Stewart McCullough is fully in accord with what the other commentators have said, but it is to the exposition that we must look for guidance on how the psalm is to be interpreted in a distinctively Christian sense. Edwin McNeill Poteat (who is incidentally a Baptist) raises the crucial question: Is the Psalm messianic? His answer is as follows:

It is to be expected, then, that where messianism is an important element in the body of Christian doctrine, this picture of the great king would be taken over in some of its details. The hope that springs eternal in the human breast needs pictures that do not fade. That such pictures usurp the place of fact, that men too often prefer an old fancy to a new truth, is something we must live with, so long as we are mortal. Is not this the true function of poetry after all? And if messianism is no more than a great recurrent, poetic theme, even on these grounds it could be dismissed as empty of meaning or value.

Even if we presume (as I think we must) that we should read "it could not be dismissed as empty of meaning and value," we have here a very

10. *Die Psalmen* (Göttingen, 1950).

11. *The Psalms*, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV (1955).

curious estimate of messianism: to wit, that it is merely an old fancy which should not be preferred, as it often regrettably is, to some new truth, the content of which is however not indicated. We presume, then, that the answer to the question he asked is: "The psalm is not messianic, but it has been taken as such. We advise you not to do so." This, I suggest, leaves the Baptists, if they use the psalm in worship, firmly in the Old Testament, and I cannot think that either H. H. Rowley or Billy Graham can be very happy at the prospect. Christian worship must be Christian.

My Roman commentator is Monsignor Kissane.¹² He too recognizes that this psalm was originally composed to commemorate the marriage of a King, but when he raises the question of its messianic character, he is terse and to the point: "There can be no doubt that the psalm is messianic. It is cited as such by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and both Jewish and Christian tradition gave it this interpretation. The Targum understood it, or at least part of it, as referring to the Messiah in the *literal* sense, and this is also the view of St. Chrysostom and St. Augustine. But it is now generally agreed that in its *literal* sense the psalm refers to a historical king and that it is Messianic in its *typical* sense." This, as we would expect from the Church of Rome, is clear and direct guidance and her monks as they sing the psalm in the divine office are at least told what to make of it.

From this survey we learn that, so long as commentators on the Psalter refuse to recognize any other meaning in scripture than the historical or literal, much of the Psalter and particularly the Royal Psalms must be devoid of any Christian theological significance. Yet this is a consequence in which the Christian community cannot lightly acquiesce. Bishop Alexander's Bampton lectures make curious reading in these days, but one passage has retained at least some of its cogency. On the tendency beginning to appear in his day to abandon a belief in the literal truth of Genesis, he remarks,

a disbelief in the Bible account of the creation of man, however explained, may coexist—it is to be feared illogically—with a reverence for the supreme authority of Christ. It can scarcely be so with the book we propose to examine. The Psalmists cannot be put away from us with an impatient shrug, to a more convenient season. At marriages and funerals, by sick-beds and in stately ceremonies, in churches and in homes, they make their voices heard at every turn. They are as near to us as the Evangelists themselves. Christianity is responsible for the Psalter with its very life.¹³

We must agree, I think, that because of their place in worship and tradition we can not avoid giving some indication to the laymen of the Church why they should sing the Psalms and what kind of interpretation of them they should adopt. But I find myself forced to the view that we cannot give that explanation and that guidance unless we are prepared to revert in some manner to the doctrine of multiple senses of scripture.

12. *The Book of Psalms* (Dublin, 1953).

13. *The Witness of the Psalms to Christ* (first published in 1876; 2nd ed., New York, 1877), p. 5.

Here we are straightway plunged into one of the most vigorous and in my opinion most fruitful debates of our time. In the last part of this paper I merely wish to make two observations on this important subject.

First, we shall have to re-define our terminology. In arguing for a further, valid sense of scripture than the strictly historical, we are faced with a difficulty of nomenclature and of historical confusion in the use of that nomenclature. Most scholars (if not all) would recognize that the way forward is not to revert to allegory. By allegory they mean the practice of using figures or incidents in the Bible to symbolize teachings which are not intrinsically related to those figures or incidents, but which depend for that relationship on the exegete's individual caprice. But an increasing number of reputable theologians are prepared to re-examine the view that typology can yield a valid theological interpretation of scripture. By typology they mean a relationship which is inherent between the two matters compared *because there is in fact an objective and historical relationship between them*. Even if it is granted that this is a legitimate distinction of typology from allegory, the further difficulty arises that earlier writers, including the New Testament authors themselves, have by no means kept the two practices or the two terms distinct. Even now we find a scholar of the irreproachable exactitude of H. H. Rowley arguing for something very like the view which Daniélou,¹⁴ Eichrodt,¹⁵ Lampe,¹⁶ and others would call typological, and yet strongly refusing the term. Thus, speaking of the New Testament event of Jesus, Rowley writes:

In finding the same pattern of revelation here and in the Old Testament we are not resorting to typology and arguing that the old revelation was a foreshadowing of the new. That is far from our thoughts here. The old revelation had a reality and a validity in its own right. The new, too, had a validity in its own right. If both were revelations of the same God, as they claimed to be, then in the common pattern of the revelation in personal and impersonal factors, where neither could explain or control the other, we have the signature of God. . . . The community of pattern does not mean that all could have been predicted before-hand, but that when the new pattern appears its community with the old can be perceived. It is as the revelation unfolds itself that the pattern becomes evident.¹⁷

That is an excellent statement of what many scholars understand to be the typological principle in scripture, but it explicitly denies the term. This confusion of terminology in the past, which still continues in the present, means that we must re-explore and re-define those terms, so that the validity of typological exegesis may be retained and the vagaries of allegorism excluded. But it will be important to recognize that the new definition will

14. J. Daniélou, *Origen* (London, 1955).

15. W. Eichrodt, "Ist die typologische Exegese sachgemässe Exegese?" in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* (Leiden, 1957), IV.

16. G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology* (London, 1957).

17. *The Unity of the Bible* (London, 1953), p. 98. A brief but thoughtful criticism of modern typological interpretation, and also of the *sensus plenior* advocated by J. Coppens, is to be found in J. D. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 159f.

be valid only for our own debate. Our understanding of typology will have a sensitivity to history built into it, simply because we are scholars of the post-Liberal-Reformation period. Because we have passed through that Second Reformation, history has a significance for us which it could not have for Paul or the writer of the Fourth Gospel or even for Calvin. *Our typology will be recognizably akin to theirs, but it will by no means be identical.* We must not be surprised for example to find even St. Paul offending against canons which we ourselves must never disrespect.¹⁸ The Liberal Reformation, having once occurred, has conditioned all our thinking with a respect for history which we cannot expect earlier generations to share.

The second observation I wish to make is that the typological approach to the Bible must inevitably be something distinctively Christian. Eichrodt has pointed out indeed that it is not something foreign to the thought of the Old Testament, and that Deutero-Isaiah is thinking in something very like these ways when he proclaims the Restoration in terms of the Exodus. Again Frank Cross speaks of the typological thought of the Qumran Community,¹⁹ and it will be an interesting investigation, when and if Christian theologians have come to an agreement on their own new understanding of typological thinking, to see whether the Qumran exegesis falls properly within or outside its scope. But it will certainly be a different brand of typology. Since the Christian takes the event of Jesus Christ and uses that event to detect and evaluate the patterns of history in the Old Testament, the resultant interpretation must inevitably be something distinctively Christian. K. J. Woollcombe remarks: "Historical typology as defined above came into existence with Christendom. Its character as a method of writing was of course determined by the character of prophecy, and its character as a method of exegesis by the character of the study of prophecy. It was also considerably influenced by allegory. But when St. Paul wrote that Adam was a figure (*typos*) of Christ, he was saying something substantially new."²⁰ This means, however, that the whole of the Old Testament means something different to the Christian from what it does to the Jew. That is why the Christian has a distinctive name for this body of literature; for him these are not merely the Hebrew Scriptures, but they are the Old Testament as over against and complementary to the New Testament. The importance of this observation is that in it lies our safeguard against vagaries of interpretation. Allegory which is a-historical has no such safeguard. The literal sense is safeguarded by the factual historicity of its own event. A passage means *this*, and can mean nothing but this—at that level. *The typological sense on the other hand is safeguarded not by the Old Testament's own history but by the historical event of Jesus Christ and his Church.* Clearly the establishing of that further sense of scripture will always be an art rather than a science but the principle governing it is, I submit, clear.

18. E.g., in I Cor. 10:1-5.

19. F. M. Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran* (New York, 1958), p. 85f.

20. *Essays on Typology*, p. 42.

Thus if we return in closing to Psalm 45, we may acknowledge with all students of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jewish and Christian, that its literal sense is that of an epithalamium for a Hebrew King. As such, however, there is no reason why a Christian congregation should sing it in its worship today. But in its typical sense it refers to Christ the Conquering King and His Bride the Church, and in singing the psalm it is these thoughts and these aspirations which the Christian congregation should have in mind. I therefore suggest that one of the finest expositions of the *Christian* sense of the psalm is that given by Charles Wesley, in one of his greatest compositions:

My heart is full of Christ, and longs
Its glorious matter to declare.