The Book of Psalms

Prayerbook of the Church

Chris Jeynes

Deep calls to deep
in the rear of your waterfalls
Psalm 42:1
The front cover photograph was taken in Autumn 2010 in Plitvice National Park, Croatia.
Ps.47:7b (Masoretic text, unvocalised)

Sing ye praises with understanding [maskil]
Ps.47:7b (King James Version, 1611)

Hymn joyous song [maskil]
Ps.47:7b (Robert Alter, The Book of Psalms, 2007)
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Preface

This is a book for anyone interested in the famous Psalms of David, whether as an important part of our literary heritage or as any sort of believer for whom the Psalms are a well-known and special spiritual resource. But to appreciate even their literary quality it is necessary to also appreciate what the psalmists are trying to say, that is, their spiritual message.

I am not a Biblical scholar, nor do I speak Hebrew or Greek, being a mere monoglot scientist. I have written this book from the standpoint of a Christian believer, but my arguments do not presuppose belief, and they are intended to be a valid comment on the text independent of one's belief. However, the psalmists themselves clearly believed something, and to pretend that they were neutral would be to completely misread their text. Therefore, dear reader, if you are not a believer I urge you to temporarily suspend your disbelief so that you can truly appreciate the wisdom of these ancient sages, a wisdom that has deeply influenced, and sometimes controlled, the history of our own times. And the test of quality in a book is whether it changes the reader: I think that anyone, whatever their beliefs, who truly grapples with Psalms will be changed; I hope that perhaps I may encourage some readers to do this.

I was brought up as a Lutheran, in a church which looks to the English like a high-ish sort of Anglican church – dressing up in robes but no bells & smells. But at university as a young man I worked critically through everything I had been told; eventually becoming convinced that I had essentially heard the truth from my parents. And the symbol for the persuasion I felt is represented by Psalm 40:

I waited patiently for the LORD
and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry.
He brought me up also out of an horrible pit,
out of the miry clay
and set my feet upon a rock
Ps.40:1f

The cynical often poke fun at the existential angst experienced by the young, but it is nevertheless very real, and when a youth finds his footing after being in the horrible pit a sort of miracle has occurred. This is not really the place to elaborate on this philosophically; the point is that it was poetry from three millennia ago that enabled me then to operate as a person.

And still enables me today! Since that day over forty years ago I have never tired of the psalms – which says something about their literary quality if of nothing else! What is it about this book, which is found at the heart of every Bible? I soon discovered that the liturgical churches (including the Anglicans) prescribe the frequent recital of the psalms; in the case of the Anglicans, the whole book every month, and Psalms is a long book! Very early I marked my Bible for the prescribed psalms every day, and for thirty years I have tried most days to read one or other of them. It is remarkable that this poetry is rich enough to remain compelling under this sort of repetition. Over the years, returning again and again to the same poems, I started to see how they quoted each other and the previous scriptures, and how the later scriptures quoted them in their turn. It was like a treasure hunt, and the more I returned the more I saw. And all the time, the poems themselves were deceptively simple and simultaneously unrestrained in their emotional intensity – sometimes outrageously unrestrained.

Why inflict another book on the long-suffering public, and why now? I think that the Psalms are very interesting; more to the point, I think that in important ways they encapsulate all Christian belief (probably Jewish too, but I am unqualified to speak about that). And today, we are seeing a flowering of scholarly research re-establishing the
foundations of the orthodox understanding of Christianity: although we wouldn't wish to return to the uncritical piety of pre-Enlightenment thought, we do wish to combat the excesses of systematic scepticism that have plagued theology in the last couple of centuries. No relationship will flourish in an atmosphere of deep suspicion, nor can new creative understandings be forged in such an atmosphere. Many modern writers have contributed to this new research; if just one stands out then to my mind it must be N.T.Wright who has established, in his monumental Christian Origins series (1992, 1997, 2003, 2013), the "critical realist" attitude that I have also adopted here.

This present work is heavily footnoted. I make no apology for this because both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures are very intricate books, with a dense interlocking web of self-references, and my footnotes frequently give lists of Biblical (and other) references that would be a distraction in the text. Since one of my purposes is precisely to give substance to this web of references, this type of footnote is essential to the text. I also occasionally include the canonical Greek or Hebrew text where it is appropriate (but always with a transliteration and translation), since the original texts are easily available (and searchable) on the Internet and nothing prevents serious students of the texts from getting a closer acquaintance with and appreciation of the original. I have even included the original Hebrew of the epigraph (for more on this see §2.3). You don't have to know Hebrew and Greek to start! But if you are put off by the strange ancient writing (which is of course still in everyday use!) you may not be able to follow what the scholars say.

It is often truly said that the Bible is a collection of 66 books composed over a period of at least a thousand years by a couple of dozen different people. But there is some merit in the old uncritical way of treating it as an integrated book by a single author. This is because all the later authors are keenly aware of the previous ones, and allude to them continuously. And the earliest authors are keenly aware of their preceding oral tradition reaching back into the mists of time: all the Biblical authors are heavily constrained by their community. But this constraint on what they are permitted to say does not constrain their freedom! On the contrary, it enhances it. J.S.Bach is renowned for being a perfect example of this as the master of fugue. His music is heavily structured, but these formalities enable it to reach soaring and exhilarating heights. Just so the Bible.

I emphasise that this heavily allusive referencing is, if anything, even more true of the New Testament authors. My own experience is that I started to understand the Gospel properly when I realised that the book of Romans was an extended and detailed commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures, expressed with an extraordinary density and brevity. In this book on the Psalms my purpose is to read them in context – to present them in the context of the allusions of the poets to their spiritual history, and also in the context of later references back to the poetry. This is like straightening out spaghetti, and footnotes also allow the systematic digressionary excursions required to appreciate the depth of the text without making the main argument too convoluted to grasp.

Of course, I do not pretend to "straighten out" or tidy up the Psalms – perish the thought! I only touch the edges of His ways (Job 26:14), and that only tentatively and very fallibly. The Biblical text is what it is, in all its complexity, and in all its glorious simplicity. If my poor thoughts help anyone (believer or not) to see in a sharper focus some of the riches and depths of these poems; if anyone is just a little more able to touch some of the wonder of the purposes of God or appreciate a little more the settled purpose of God to do wonders; if the heart of anyone is stirred up just a little bit more to perceive that God's view of us is different from – and vastly greater than – what our own walled-up imaginations can conceive; if anyone sees any of these things just a little more clearly, then I will be satisfied.
Acknowledgements

I am a physical scientist, not a biblical scholar, so I rely on a relatively small number of scholars for the information I use in this synthesis. Foremost in my mind, at a general level, is N.T.Wright's monumental work *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (3 volumes so far, 1992, 1996, 2003) which in my opinion has changed the terms of Biblical scholarship since he has vigorously, elegantly, and persuasively presented the text from an unashamedly historical perspective while fully integrating the philosophical and spiritual contexts of the discussion. From my point of view, it is Wright who has contended decisively with the theological sceptics, and this book would not have been conceived without his work.

Also at a general level is Rob Lacey's *Word on the Street* (first published at *The Street Bible*, 2003), which was physically implemented by the Lacey Theatre Company (2005-2012), led by my daughter Elin. Rob and Elin were responsible for driving home to me the truth that the Bible is Story. We are conditioned to think of "Bible stories" as the stuff of Sunday School, and theological treatises as proper adult activity. But this is the very opposite of the truth. It is only when adults grasp that God has a purpose, and that his Word to us is a Story – with beginning, end, a deep and resonant plot together with a cast of real-life and very colourful characters – that they can really start to appreciate the Good News of God. Theology is for the children and Story is for the adults! I try to make a serious point here: of course Story is for everyone (and probably the children appreciate it the best) but in my opinion children are much more philosophically minded than we usually give them credit for. My experience it that they appreciate theology more than the adults, who are usually too overwhelmed by other concerns to concentrate properly.

On the Psalms themselves, I have throughout this book systematically referred to (and cited) A.F.Kirkpatrick's *Psalms* (1903) and Robert Alter's *The Book of Psalms* (2007). Both of these vastly different books have reliable readings of the text with a wealth of informative commentary. Ron Bailey recommended Kirkpatrick to me, and I came across Alter in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (eds. Alter & Kermode, 1987). Alter's translation is exceptionally interesting: his intention is to give a literal rendering of the text that retains its rhythm and stress patterns. In my recent reading of the Psalms I have benefited greatly from Michael Wilcock's *The Message of the Psalms: Songs of the People of God* (2 vols, 2001; in the IVF series *The Bible Speaks Today*), although I have not explicitly cited him much. A commentary such as Wilcock's is very helpful to those who need some help to start to engage with the poetry, but not too much detail.

At a more specific level, I have not cited Michele Guinness' *Woman, the Full Story* (2003), but her very careful treatment of issues of female equality is also witty and accessible and has strongly influenced my understanding of these basic issues. I have also found in Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2007) a detailed presentation and analysis of the historical data and sources that justifies my insistence on the respect that the ancient editors had for their sources, an insistence central to my argument.

Many other writers have been important to me at various times, and they are cited at the proper places. Perhaps I should mention here in particular Walter Brueggemann's *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (1995) which helped me to understand the importance and meaning of wonder to the psalmists, an understanding which has shaped this book.

Not least I would like to record my deep appreciation of the love, support, understanding and forbearance of my longsuffering wife. Finally :-

O let my heart hymn thee and be not still
LORD my God, I give thee thanks forever
Ps.30:12

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1 Prologue

Jesus Christ was raised from the dead on Easter Sunday, AD30 (or possibly AD33). This is a definite historical statement, as is underlined by the footnote: we may still be slightly uncertain about the precise year but it remains an historical fact that, however it is understood, something happened then that changed the world. At that time the fastest growing religion was the cult of the Roman Emperor, but only a few decades later it was the new Christian religion that was growing the fastest. However unpalatable the assertion of the Resurrection may be to both modern and ancient man, that something happened at that time (whatever it was) must be beyond question to anyone willing to consider the evidence.

I accept the Resurrection, and consequently that Jesus is Lord: that makes me a Christian. But the Christological implications of the event can only be recognised when one puts the event into its proper historical context. Why does the Resurrection make Christ Lord? Precisely because "Christ" is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew "Messiah": both mean the anointed one, and the Hebrew prophets, priests and kings were anointed to their vocations. It is because Jesus was recognised as "the Christ [the Anointed One] of God" (Luke 9:20, and Matt.16:16; Mark 8:29), according to the Scriptures (1Cor.15:3,4), that the Resurrection had the significance it had, and why it changed the world.

And these "Scriptures", what are they? Of course, it is the collection of books that make up the Hebrew sacred writings, and this collection was pretty well defined at the time of Jesus by the books included in the Septuagint (LXX: see §5.1); the translation into Greek of the Hebrew writings, made in Alexandria, that was complete by the second century BC. Both the Christians and the Jews subsequently recognised the priority of the Hebrew text, so that Jerome at the end of the fourth century AD marked the LXX books for which no Hebrew was extant, and the Masoretic scholars (see §5.2) also preserved and copied only the Hebrew originals. There is now, and always was, essential agreement on what the sacred text is.

In the collection of books that is the Hebrew Scriptures I hope to persuade you, dear reader, that one book stands out in a special way. Before Jesus was raised from the dead he died, or rather, he was killed. He stirred up controversy, and it was the powers-that-be that organised his murder: the Gospels are a record of this developing hatred against him of the powerful. Repeatedly they challenged him, and repeatedly he turned the tables on them and returned the challenge. On one memorable occasion they attacked his doctrine of Resurrection, but he silences them by saying,

Now, that the dead are raised even Moses shewed at the bush, when he calleth the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. For he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him

Lk.20:37f

But he then goes on to quote Psalm 110 ("the Lord said unto my Lord …") and asks them:

"If David therefore calleth him Lord, how is he then his son?"

Lk.20:44

An argument for the earlier date is made from the chronology of Paul by J.A.T.Robinson, Redating the New Testament (1976), also citing the dating of the crucifixion on independent grounds by A.Strobel, "Der Termin des Todes Jesu" (Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 51, 1960, 69-101); J.Finegan, Handbook of Biblical Chronology (1964) 285-301; and J.J.Gunther, Paul, messenger and exile: a study in the chronologyof his Life and Letters (1972). Robinson's argument turns on the date of the famine of Acts 11:27-30 being 46AD (two years after the death of Herod, as given by Josephus in Antiquities of the Jews, c.94AD), and hence, taking the chronology of Acts and Galations seriously, Paul's conversion in 33AD.
Jesus believed that the book of Psalms is deeply implicated in the Resurrection precisely because it is deeply interested in God's hand in history and in the security of the compassion and reliability of God. We live – we can only live – in the shadow of his wings (Pss.17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7). These are big themes, but Psalms is even bigger than that: it insists on the mutual relationship that is possible for us with God by showing us how to speak to him. In the Bible, the history books tell us what happened, the prophets tell us why and Psalms shows us how to respond. The prophets bring God's word to us, and the psalmists show us how to speak with God.

Psalms is not just a book of poetry, it is a book of poetry located in, and commenting on, history; a book of Praises to him who was, who is, and who is to come, the Lord of history. What God has done, and will do, is important to the psalmists, and also to us, insofar as we pay them any attention.

I have thought for a long time that we would be hugely enriched were we to read the Bible – and especially Psalms – more historically. That is, becoming more aware of how the text is located in history, and how it is trying to anchor us into a richer awareness of what has happened, of why it has happened, and consequently of who we are. There are many aspects of this, which is why this is a book and not a short essay.

The Christian church is now emerging from nearly two hundred years of madness, during which scholars handled the Scriptures with a systematic hostile scepticism – biblical scholars mind you! But the most recent generation of scholars have realised that such an approach is systematically biased; it is not scholarly and it is not used for other historical source materials – indeed, scholars from other disciplines tend to look on with incredulity. A more balanced approach treats the text as intrinsically valuable; a sober and thoroughly coherent text of the highest literary quality. Of course there are textual problems with significant evidence of textual corruption – the Hebrew Scriptures are all at least some two and a half millennia old: what do you expect? But the vast majority of these textual corruptions are of tertiary importance; only a few are even of secondary importance. The criticism now made of the older generations of scholars is that they did not treat the text with respect; they applied their own lights to emend the text far more than a properly conservative approach would require. They assumed incoherence, quite unjustifiably.

This renewed attitude of respect for the text means that we treat the text properly as an historical document. Of course, as with all historical documents, we cross-question and cross-check them as far as possible; what we should not do is assume from the outset that what the text says is certainly not true! With such an approach all our knowledge of previous times would dissolve into illusion. There are many major problems with the history of the Jews – Moses has not been dated unequivocally, there is very little archaeological evidence for the existence of David etc etc – but this means only that our knowledge is limited, not that the account in the Hebrew Scriptures is false! There are many ways of reading this ancient text and I believe that we have not got to the bottom of it yet.

An interesting example of this is in the assessment of the historicity of the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The theologians tended to treat Acts, along with the Gospels, as propaganda: historically unreliable in principle. But the classical historian, A.N.Sherwin-White, says (Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament, 1963, p.189): "For Acts, the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Yet Acts is, in simple terms and judged externally, no less of a propaganda narrative than the Gospels, liable to similar distortions. But any attempt to reject its basic historicity, even in matters of detail, must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.” Of course, the historicity of Acts can be tested much more easily than that of the Gospels, since it speaks of events in the wider world. But if Acts is reliable, why should the other books not be?
An interesting example is Book IV of *Psalms* (Pss.90-106). The conventional wisdom among commentators is that David's psalm of thanks in I Chronicles 16 was cobbled together by the Chronicler from the 17 psalms in Book IV. But on the face of it the text asserts that David's psalm has *priority*! Where is the evidence that this is in fact not true? The commentators have no *evidence* for their reading, only their prior assumptions about the text. I assert in this book that taking the text generally at face value yields both a more coherent and a much richer account. And throughout, I start by looking for the *historical* context of the text, since the strength of the Gospel is precisely that it is located in history.

All serious modern commentators agree that our text of *Psalms* is of very high literary quality. It is simply constructed (the appearance of artlessness bespeaks a high artistry) but very rich in allusion, both linguistic and literary. *Psalms* is itself located firmly in Jewish history; the psalmists refer copiously to their literature, and subsequent canonical writers refer copiously to *Psalms*. I hope here to highlight this web of references.

Ephrem the Syrian (d.373) has compared the inexhaustibility of the Word of God to a stream from which we quench our thirst. We come to a text as we come to the stream: we are able to comprehend the one just as little as the other; we can dip in our hands to lift the water to our lips, but we cannot grasp the whole stream. So it is with the Psalms: they have nourished and enlivened the church for two millennia and they remain pregnant with undiscovered meaning. The most significant part of the impact of the poetry is not its literary merit, which is great, but that those men and women long ago were able with Asaph to: *call upon [God] in the day of trouble*. And to this cry of the heart, for us now just as for them then, God will reply: *I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me* (Ps.50:15).

**The Structure of the present Book**

This is not a commentary on *Psalms*, although I do make detailed comments on many of them. Instead, I want primarily to locate the psalms in history systematically in a way not done before. Where does this literature come from?

Chapter 2 is the scene-setter, giving a basic and brief introduction to what the Book of *Psalms* is, and how it is related to history in general and us in particular.

Chapter 3 immediately goes to the central characteristic of *Psalms*, that is, the relation of the psalmists with their history. These poets treat history in a way now almost completely unfamiliar to us – and remember that the vast bulk of this poetry was composed long before the famous fifth century Greek historian Herodotus worked. Herodotus is often called the "father of history", since his is the first book we have in a modern style of writing, with a narrative account of events, ostensibly factual rather than fabulous, and including a critical evaluation of the sources of his information. But tellingly, Herodotus (like Thucydides after him) is interested primarily in preserving the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of other peoples; and more particularly, to show how they came into conflict.

Herodotus, *Histories* (c. 425BC)

I will discuss historical styles later in the book (in Chapter 6), but in Chapter 3 I shall start to unfold the very different range of interest of the Biblical poets of *Psalms*. The psalmists are not concerned to simply give an account of what happened, nor are they concerned merely with the achievements of, and conflicts between, peoples. Neither are they "critical" in a modern sense, although I do show in Chapter 6 that the Biblical editors actually did take a very critical view of their sources. The psalmists have a much larger purpose; as Milton expressed it much later at the opening of his great poem, they intended to:-

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They wished to discern the meaning of the past events in their present, and they sang their responses to this meaning. They both applied faith to their history and allowed their history to challenge their faith. They wished to discern the meaning of the past events in their present, and they sang their responses to this meaning. They both applied faith to their history and allowed their history to challenge their faith. 

There is a curious schizophrenia today between reason and faith, despite the fact that in human thinking these are brothers – two sides of the same coin: faith is illuminated by reason, and reason depends on faith, as I explain at some philosophical length in the section on "miracles" above (§3.6). I should mention here that modern language about "miracles" and the "supernatural" is emphatically not Biblical: it is also almost invariably incoherent, and this is true both of (most) Christians and also of everyone else, including the modern scientific atheists. "Miracle" language is modern, being an odd artefact of the Enlightenment; the ancients had a completely different understanding of phenomena that we today might call "miraculous". It is difficult to rid ourselves of false preconceptions, but we have imbibed a set of preconceptions that can be shown to be baseless; it should have been swept away by the twentieth century revolutions in logic and physics.

Chapter 3 itself is about the exalted language of wonder that permeates the whole Book of Psalms. This is entirely unfamiliar to modern man; it is a jolting gestalt switch – the psalmists have an entirely different perspective from what we are used to, and we cannot even start to appreciate their poetry unless we allow our minds to be expanded into this unfamiliar territory. I have used the word "impossibility" for this attitude of wonder specifically because I want to spur you, dear reader, into re-evaluating what is reasonable. Goethe thought that the reasonable man was, per se, incapable of wonder:

Grau, teuer Freund, ist alle Theorie
und grün des Lebens goldner Baum
(Grey, dear friend, is all theory / and green the golden tree of life)

Goethe, Faust. Der Tragödie erster Teil (1808).

Goethe is a poet as close to the heart of German-speaking people as Shakespeare is to English speakers, and Faust is the most-staged play in the German language; these words are given to Mephistopheles (the devil figure), but Goethe thought that here the devil was speaking truly.\(^3\) This suspicion of reason that Goethe expresses, a suspicion that is an odd philosophical consequence of the "Enlightenment", remains widespread today despite many recent scientific authors attacking it directly. Biologist Steven J. Gould, in his Wonderful Life (1989) makes the point that reason should not, must not, and indeed cannot preclude wonder; as does geneticist Sean B. Carroll even more persuasively in his Endless Forms Most Beautiful (2006). And it is reported that British children are flocking to study physics, partly because of (quantum physicist) Brian Cox's hugely successful BBC television series "Wonders of the Universe" (2012). The psalmists are systematically

\(^3\) This may be a controversial position: actually here Goethe's text is systematically ambiguous. The line is near the start of the play where Mephistopheles (dressed as Faust) is speaking to the student ("Schüler") in the study ("Studierzimmer"). But Mephistopheles has just prefaced his previous speech to the student with the aside, "Ich bin des Trocknen Tons nun satt / Muß wieder recht den Teufel spielen" ("I'm sated with this dessicated banter / better now get on with playing the devil"); the student responds to Mephistopheles' veiled and ambiguous sexual suggestions with, "Das sieht schon besser aus! Man sieht doch wo und wie" ("That sounds much better! The Where and the How, I see."). Translation from http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/FaustI ScenesIVoIVoI.htm by A.S.Kline, downloaded 23rd July 2013. Then Mephistopheles' line ("Grau, ist alle Theorie ...") is clearly intended to be disingenuous by the poet. Nevertheless, the point of the play is that Mephistopheles corrupts the most upright – and he cannot do this without telling them things they recognise as true. The persuasiveness of the devil boils down to his ability to tell the truth almost all the time! But I think Goethe is wrong. Theory is not grey!
interested in wonder, but they push their treatment of this much further than we are used to, and very much further than most of us would be comfortable with. I hope to persuade you to leave your comfort zone, and participate in an exhilarating ride!

Chapters 4 and 5 are mostly descriptive, gathering together (and hopefully shedding light on) a large number of "facts" about various textual and linguistic features of Psalms; I am sure that I am not the only one to have puzzled over these for many years.

Then we come to the heart of the book. Chapters 6 – 8 consider the themes of History, Lament and Confidence, in terms of a close discussion of a series of individual psalms. Chapter 9 gathers these and other themes together to unfold the importance of the King to the Jews (also the Christians, if anything even more so!), again in the context of a series of individual psalms. I repeat: this book is not a commentary on Psalms, it has a much wider purpose. I want to locate Psalms firmly both in its own history and in ours; there is after all only one world, and only one history of it even though many historians will try to persuade you differently. But beware! You should be warned: it is when we suddenly appreciate how Psalms lights up history that we are vulnerable! Perhaps our own history will be lit up in turn, and our own world turned upside down?

None of the discussion of individual psalms is in isolation from the rest of the Bible. It is precisely the context that I am particularly interested in, a context that has not been expressed adequately by previous authors for modern readers. The poems are usually brief, occasionally extremely brief, but they are never thin: they are packed with references and allusions. We must never listen to them with a flat ear – this is of course true for all poetry; the psalmists are continuously referring, very self-consciously, to a series of very specific ideas. They knew that their audience was steeped in these ideas and were confident that their references would be understood. We need to retrieve the same background to hear them properly.

Chapter 6 returns explicitly to the subject of history in its philosophical context. I explained at the outset the philosophical importance of history to Christians: this same importance is fully recognised by the psalmists. I underline in this chapter the continuity of this attitude from the Jews to the Christians, and show how this same historical attitude informs both the Jewish liturgy and also their lamentations – and the Jews have always had terrible occasion for grief. The terrors that have visited the Jews are common to all human history; the psalmists are still able to speak for us.

The attitude of the psalmists differs markedly from that in modern historical writing from Herodotus on; for the psalmists, history must ultimately be about Covenant: about the promises of God. Looking back to the past enables them – and us too – to look forward to the future! Covenant is central to both Jewish and Christian thinking. It is because God is Lord of History, the one who declares the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying: "my counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Is.46:10) that we have the confidence to dare to live today.

Chapter 7 is specifically about the Lament psalms. Is it not odd to have lamentations in a Book of Praises? It seems to me that it is precisely because the psalmists have the courage to voice their lamentations to God that Psalms has spoken to continuous generations so powerfully for two thousand years and more. The world is a shockingly terrible place, and just because we in the rich West currently live in peace and security – not to mention unprecedented comfort! – is no reason to shut our eyes to all the evil that has darkened the pages of history and is still perpetrated today. And what if, God forbid, the dark days knock on our own doors? What resources will we have?
The essence of injustice is that it necessarily makes the innocent suffer. And lament is the cry of the innocent to God. It is a curious fact that it is when the oppressed man or woman cries to God that God acts:

And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians …

Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Ex.3:7ff

We are not supposed to suffer in silence: biblically, we are supposed to cry to God. And God responds to our crying – he does not respond to our silence. Am I a man? Primo Levi asked in response to Auschwitz.

He raises a searing cry to God, and speaks for us all. The psalmists also raise such cries, and even though they do always put their laments into the context of their confidence in the justice, the power and the promises of God, this underlying confidence is often hard to see. Answers are frequently not available, as the psalmists knew very well.

Modern comfortable man has the habit of hurriedly turning over the pages of these intense and heartrending psalms, whereas it seems to me that we need to look them square in the face. If and when the evil day dawns, we will need them too; in any case, we are not fully human if we are unable to "weep with them that weep" (Rom.12:15).

In Chapter 8 we appreciate various aspects of confidence in God, a confidence characteristic of the David who went out to meet Goliath. Without confidence that we will not be turned away we will not do the ridiculous thing of seeking God! But this is the central feature of Psalms that has enthralled generations of seekers: that it is possible to come into the presence of the Maker of heaven and earth; that we can call to him, and he will answer us! This confidence is a most inexplicable thing, and extraordinary; we will not hear the psalmists without appreciating this.

Then in Chapter 9 we draw further attention to all these threads by teasing out yet another set of threads concerning the King. God is the King of Israel (1Sam.8:7), and he raised up David to be a king after his own heart (1Sam.13:14; 16:7); David was a king who knew that God was King of kings, see Book IV where this is quite explicit: The LORD reigns (Pss.96:10; 93:1; 99:1)! David is the sweet singer of Israel (2Sam.23:1); the prototypical King who points to the King that is to come. David personifies the Promises of God, and these psalms of the King are central in our understanding not only of Psalms but indeed of the entire Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments!

Finally, in the brief Chapter 10 we conclude. It is not possible to conclude all that can be said about Psalms, but in any case, we wrap up this book!

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4 Primo Levi, Se Questo e un Uomo (1958); If This is a Man, transl. Stuart Woolf (1960)
5 References are, for Maker of heaven and earth, Pss.115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 146:6; for he will answer us, Pss.3:4; 17:6; 81:7; 86:7; 91:15; 118:5; 120:1; 138:3.
2 The place of Psalms in the hearts of God's people

Since I write as a Christian I am concerned to show the continuity between the Hebrew Scriptures (which are recognised by both Jews and Christians as the Word of God, and which Christians habitually refer to as the "Old Testament") and the Greek Scriptures (the "New Testament", recognised only by the Christians). There is a tendency in some Christian thought to discount and devalue the Hebrew Scriptures (and the Book of Psalms along with them) as being somehow superceded by the Greek Scriptures. This is an entirely false position: the New Testament writers very firmly and explicitly recognise the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Evangelists emphasise that this is also Jesus' position, and Paul especially constructs a very detailed theology based on a close commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures. Psalms belongs to both Christians and Jews equally, and I show in this chapter that Christians have given Psalms a very high value from the earliest times.

I do not believe that Christians should read Psalms any differently from their Jewish friends, except occasionally where we will read passages Christologically. But even in these passages, Jewish commentators will agree that the psalmists did have a Messianic intention, even though we will disagree on how to interpret this intention; both communities are building interpretation onto what is evident in the text we have. My intention throughout the book is to do my best to open the intention of the original poets to modern readers, not to impose a Christian interpretation on the text. But in some places the New Testament authors put heavy weight on passages from the psalms and it would be remiss not to comment appropriately. After all, those very New Testament authors were Jews too, and they represented a school of first century Jewish thought that only subsequently became separated from the Jewish tradition.

One example of first century Jewish thought that is remembered by Christians but not by Jews is the list in Table 1 (§2.2) of all the Biblical psalms that are not included in Psalms which includes several psalms related to the birth of Jesus which are textually very closely related to Jewish psalmody, for all that they have come down to us in Greek.

This book is about both an historical reading of Psalms, and also the emotional content of Psalms; this first chapter is an introduction aimed at helping modern readers initially locate Psalms historically in contexts we shall elaborate further throughout the book, and it ends with a prose poem on pouring out our hearts to God (Ps.62:8).

2.1 The history and significance of the Book of Psalms

Open any Bible at the middle of the book and you will be in the Book of Psalms (which I shall write as Psalms). The psalms have always been at the heart of the worship of faithful Jews and Christians, and in part it is obvious why. But there are far more reasons for the centrality of Psalms than is obvious, and this book tries to begin to explain them.

Psalms, an Old Testament book, is central even for Christians and this centrality is indicated by the fact that most editions of the New Testament published by itself also include Psalms. There seems to be a trend today where Psalms and Proverbs are thought of together. This is simply an error. It is true that both books are considered as "Wisdom"
books, but *Proverbs*, although valuable, does not begin to match the importance of *Psalms*. *Proverbs* speaks to the head, but *Psalms* speaks to the heart!

In this book I shall proceed on the assumption that if the text appears to claim something then we should start by taking it at face value. So the superscription of Psalm 23 says, "A *psalm of David*, and unless there is good evidence to the contrary (which I have not found to date!) we are entitled to assume that David composed the psalm. This dates it to about 1000 BC (and note that this predates Homer by several generations!). But scholarly opinion is still reluctant to ascribe authorship to David: Kirkpatrick is a conservative commentator, but in his book (of 1903) he remarks on the opening line of the psalm, "What a natural opening … for the shepherd-king – if the psalm is his!" (my emphasis). We cannot prove that David composed it, but then we cannot prove that he didn't compose it either! But the text says (or appears to say) that David was the author – why should we not believe this? The onus is on the sceptics to produce proper evidence.

*Psalms* was completed in the canonical form we have it after the return from Babylon: Ps.137 is very clearly from the Exile, and I read Ps.118 as a psalm of the company of the successors of Haggai and Zechariah on the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in BC444 (Neh.8:17; 12:43). But *Psalms* was edited together from existing much earlier sources. Nobody doubts that literary Hebrew is very old – much older than literary Greek: the right-to-left script bespeaks an originally lithographic scribal technique, where Greek script (and cuneiform too) being left-to-right indicates a papyrographic technique7. Also the consonantal Hebrew script shows that it is mnemonic for an intrinsically aural rather than a textual communication, emphasising the centrality of the oral tradition, a centrality reinforced by all later Jewish practise.

But although the *Book of Psalms* that we have is, in its current textual form, almost certainly 5th century at the latest, it equally certainly incorporates collections of psalms that are much older, dating back to David. That one psalm (Ps.90) is ascribed to Moses shows that the form is ancient, but again there is no doubt that it was "popularised" by David, who is even called the *sweet singer of Israel* (2Sam.23:1). *Psalms* belongs to Jerusalem, to *Zion, the holy hill* (Ps.2:6; Joel 2:1; 3:17). And they belong to us Christians too, who look forward to the new Jerusalem (Pss.51:18; 147:2; Is.44:26,28; Zech.1:16; Rev.3:12; 21:2).

Indeed, they belong to the whole of Europe west of the Urals, since they have conditioned European culture for the last thousand years (at least!); actually, they belong to the world since there is nowhere under the sun where they have not been heard and loved. Anyone willing to allow their spirits to soar in response to others' should learn to listen to the psalmists.

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7 Lithography: literally writing in stone. Right handed people use chisel & hammer and naturally write right-to-left. For God writing the commandments in stone see Ex.24:12; 32:1; Deut.4:13; 9:10; 27:8; Jos.8:32; 24:26f; 1Kings 8:9: for the wicked having adamantine hearts on which the sacred words cannot be written see Zech.7:12. Note that *adamant* is a stone harder than flint (Ez.3:9). Right-handed people writing on paper naturally go left-to-right to avoid smudging the ink. Interestingly, the Hebrew texts we have are almost never lithographic judging by the archaeological witness, but the writing style is designed to evoke the words of God, the sacred script written on stone as a permanent record. It is interesting that the Old English verb "wrîtan" is etymologically derived from the Old Frisian *writan* to score, Frisian *write* to wear by rubbing, Old Saxon *writan* to cut, Old High German *riʒan* to tear, Old Norse *rita* to score (OED): that is, it does not involve ink! Note also that lithography – "stone-writing" – is a Stone Age activity long pre-dating penmanship: it is very ancient indeed (Biblical evidence of stone working is the ancient reference of Ex.7:19 to "stone vessels").
2.2 The extent of the psalms

In this book we will try to understand something of the history and meaning of the psalms; why they are important, and why they should be recognised as important today.

Psalms contains 150 poems. These poems cover a wide variety of subjects and are in a wide variety of moods. They are an extraordinary literature, dating from over 3000 years ago and having exerted a powerful influence on the minds and imaginations of millions of people of all nations through the ages.

The first thing to say is that although most Biblical psalms are in Psalms, a few are not, and these few are especially important. These are listed in Table 1, in chronological order.

Table 1: Biblical psalms outside Psalms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The song of Miriam at the defeat of Pharaoh</td>
<td>Ex.15:21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The song of Moses at the defeat of Pharaoh</td>
<td>Ex.15:1-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Moses' songs of the Ark of the Covenant</td>
<td>Num.10:35,36 (cf. Ps.68:1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The song of Moses at his death</td>
<td>Deut.32:1-43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The song of Deborah</td>
<td>Judges 5 (cf. Ps.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The song of Hannah</td>
<td>1Sam.2:1-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>David's lament for Saul and Jonathan</td>
<td>2Sam.1:19-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>David's psalm of thanks when the Ark entered Jerusalem</td>
<td>1Chron.16:8-36 (cf. Book IV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>David's song of praise on the establishment of peace</td>
<td>2Sam.22 (= Ps.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>David's song of praise at his death</td>
<td>1Chron.29:10-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Isaiah's songs of praise</td>
<td>Is.25:1-8; 26:1-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hezekiah's psalm of thanks</td>
<td>Is.38:10-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Habakkuk's prayer</td>
<td>Hab.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish</td>
<td>Jonah 2 (cp. Ps.42:7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Jeremiah's complaint</td>
<td>Jer.20:7-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Jeremiah's prayer</td>
<td>Jer.32:17-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Jeremiah's Five Lamentations on the fall of Jerusalem</td>
<td>Lamentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Ezekiel's Lament</td>
<td>Ez.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>The Epilogue of Proverbs (the Noble Wife)</td>
<td>Prov.31:10-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>The song of Mary</td>
<td>Luke 1:46-55 (cf. 1Sam.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>The song of Zechariah</td>
<td>Luke 1:68-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>The song of the angels and the prayer of Simeon</td>
<td>Luke 2:14, 29-32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is extraordinary that the work of women is explicit (and prominent) in this literature, considering the status of women at that time. The first recorded psalm is Miriam's: note that the text makes it plain that although it gives priority of position to Moses, as befits his rank as God's appointed leader, the temporal priority must be Miriam's ("the prophetess"). Miriam was the prophet's elder sister who looked for him when he was a baby. In the time of the judges only the songs of women (Deborah the judge and Hannah the prophet's mother) are recorded. And the psalm of the mother of Jesus, recorded in its turn by Luke, is modelled on that of Hannah. Very few women in the ancient world were given this sort of prominence (I can't think of any!).

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8 Moses, in his first line, echoes Miriam's psalm – "the horse and his rider have been hurled into the sea". Is Moses quoting Miriam, or is Miriam quoting Moses? I maintain that the text makes it plain that Moses is quoting Miriam. Miriam spontaneously and prophetically sings praises to God for their deliverance (note that it is at this point that Miriam is called "prophetess"), and this releases Moses to develop Miriam's psalm into the deeply important Song of the Sea: one of the fundamental texts, quoted repeatedly through the Bible. For example, Ex.15:2 is quoted directly and emphatically in both Is.12 and Ps.118.
Just because a text is poetic does not make it a psalm. The Song of Solomon is a different sort of literature which was included in the canon because it was recognised as having extra allegorical layers of meaning. The book of Job is really a theatre script, with the poems being deliberately crafted for their effect on the audience, not primarily as a free personal response to God.

The prophets do include many texts which might be used as psalms (Isaiah chapter 12 is a good example), but in general I have excluded these since prophesy (God's word to us) is a different category from a psalm (our free response to God). But Isaiah's psalms in chs.25,26 are extraordinary poems, heavily quoted in later Biblical literature, and very important for Christians. I have listed Jeremiah's complaint from the stocks as another rare exception, since the text marks it as free response of the prophet; also Habakkuk's prayer, since again the superscription is of a psalm. Jonah's psalm is another similar exception (maybe there are other clear cases?). Note that the Sons of Korah quote Jonah's psalm (Ps.42:7). In any case, the book of Jonah is in a category of its own, being a very early (and a very good) example of Jewish wit, and traditionally appreciated as such in the synagogues.

It is also extraordinary that there are no Christian psalms in the New Testament. The ones recorded by Luke are all prior to the ministry of Jesus. In this respect they are continuous with, and heavily dependent on, the Old Testament. Psalms was heavily used by Christians from the beginning: it was the prayerbook for Israel, it was (and is) the prayerbook for Judah, and it continued (and continues) to be the prayerbook for the Christian Church.

2.3 "Sing ye praises with understanding"

This book's epigraph quotes this verse (Ps.47:7) in the original Hebrew and in two translations. The Hebrew title of Psalms is "Praises" and the whole book is there to encourage the people to sing praises to God, and to give them the means to do it. So this verse sums up the whole book.

It sums it up also in various different ways. The Hebrew is taken from the Masoretic text (see §5.2), but is unvocalised, that is, the marks included in the (10th century) Masoretic text which direct the vowels to be used in speaking the (consonantal) text have been omitted. This is because the ancient Hebrew was written down without vocalisation marks.

The two English translations look entirely different, but the 21st century version has the same number of syllables (and stresses) as the Hebrew. This is a deliberate decision by the translator. The poetry of the Hebrew is very terse!

Moreover, the words used in the Hebrew are difficult: "miktam" is used in many of the superscriptions of the psalms (see §4.3) and nobody is entirely sure what it means! The long English version of the verse originates in the 16th century; the Geneva Bible of 1560 gives this translation:

*Sing praifies, every one that hathe understanding*  
Ps.47:7b

where the italicisation of "every one" indicates that the English has supplied words not present in the Hebrew. Interestingly, the marginal note in Geneva for this verset reads:

He [the psalmist] requireth that understanding be joined with singing, lest the name of God be profaned with vain crying  
 marginal note to Ps.47:7b in Geneva Bible (1560)  
(modernised spelling and orthography)

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9 That Jonah is not intended to be read literally is demonstrated clearly by the claim of Nineveh being "3 days walk" across ~ 60 miles! It seems that the author relished the elements of farce he included.
What the Geneva translators (and following them, King James' translators) have done is indicate to their readers that the text is much briefer than the translations, but even so, who would have guessed that the Hebrew text of this verset has only two words?

The Hebrew text, like most poetry, is brief; like most poetry it is also allusive and ambiguous. The poet does not want to tell us what to think, he (often) gives us forms of words that can be taken in different ways. The 16th century translators consider one interpretation as valid, the 21st century translator gives a different interpretation (and see §5.2 for the justification of this). But the text really is ambiguous, and both interpretations give valid meanings of the text!

Readers of Psalms will find it endlessly satisfying to meditate deeply on what the poets are saying, and if they are unable to read Hebrew then they will compare different translations to get an indication of where the Hebrew poets were being ambiguous! Understanding is an exercise of both the mind and the spirit; and also of the will. And Praises that come from such exercise will be substantial, building up both the worshipper and his or her people – such praises will not be vain crying!

2.4 Psalms in the New Testament and early church

The Christians recognised the importance of Psalms, with Jesus quoting explicitly from "the Book of Psalms" in Lk.20:41ff (and asserting the Davidic authorship of Ps.110), and Peter quoting explicitly from "the Book of Psalms" in Acts 1:20 (citing Ps.69&109). Other explicit references to psalms are in Acts 13:33; 1Cor.14:26; Eph.5:19; Col.3:16; Jas.5:13, the latter (with a second word in Eph.5:19) using the word ψαλλω, psallo (from a root meaning to twang or pluck), indicating making music on a stringed instrument with singing. This second word is also found (twice) at 1Cor.14:15 and in Rom.15:9.10

There is no doubt whatever that Psalms was crucially important in liturgical11 use in the early Church, right from the earliest times. The occasional explicit references to the book as such in the New Testament text are emphatic, but it is also heavily quoted,12 and frequently alluded to. We do not have much direct testimony from the first century Church since there is almost no literature from that period. But the testimony of the later Christian

10 The sense of Praises ("hymn") is also used in the New Testament, in the important parallel passages of Matt.26:30; Mk.14:26 (υμνος και υμνος, hymnesantes), and also in Eph.5:19; Col.3:16 to emphasise that psalms and hymns (υμνος και υμνος, psalmois kai hymnois) go together.

11 In the (anabaptist) "Fellowship" or house church movement the idea of liturgy is frowned upon, if not entirely deprecated. However, the word is met frequently in the text of the New Testament. Jewish Pharisaical practise was certainly "liturgical" in the usual sense, and everything we know suggests that the Christians took this over, however modified for their radically new understanding. The fact that the powerful have always wanted to ritualise worship should not mean that we allow ourselves to be reduced to a poor anarchism. The most illuminating text in the New Testament using "liturgy" in a way similar to the usual current understanding is Heb.1:7, who makes his angels winds and his liturgists flames of fire. This is quoting Ps.104:4, where the LXX uses the same word liturgist to translate the Hebrew word which is used over 80 times, usually in the context of Levitical service. Its second occurrence in Ex.28:35, where it is talking of Aaron's robes, is the first time LXX translates it with the verb for liturgy (leitourgein, usually Englished as ministry).

12 I count 76 separate direct identified quotations altogether: 8 explicit references in Matthew, 4 in Mark, 5 in Luke, 9 in John (almost all different), 8 in Acts, 15 in Romans, 5 in I & II Corinthians, 1 in Ephesians, 18 in Hebrews (counting separately separate quotes from the same psalm), 2 in I Peter, and even 1 in Revelation. The quotations (not all explicitly marked as such) are from 62 separate psalms: almost half the psalms in Psalms are cited (and this doesn't count other allusions)! They are: Pss.2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 14, 16, 18, 19, 22, 24, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 48, 51, 53, 55, 62, 68, 69, 72, 78, 82, 86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 94, 95, 97, 98, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 109, 110, 111, 112, 114, 117, 118, 132, 135, 140, 143, 146. The language of the psalmists is the language of the Christian!
writers is unequivocal: the use of Psalms was ubiquitous, especially in church meetings. Ignatius (c.100AD), the first bishop of Antioch, apparently introduced antiphonal singing of psalms following a vision of angels singing this way in praise of the Trinity. Tertullian tells us in the second century that "hymns from Holy Scripture", doubtless psalms, were sung at the agapae, the love-feasts. It was common practice in the fourth century to have the Psalms by heart, and a little later such knowledge was a requirement for ordination. Tellingly, Jerome tells us that the singing of psalms by ordinary people at work was an everyday occurrence in Palestine in the fourth century.

In the liturgies of the church, the whole Psalter was recited every week by both the Roman and the Eastern Churches, and in some monastic practise it was recited daily! The Reformers thought that this was excessive and such burdensome practise was abandoned. Now in the Anglican Church the Psalter is (notionally) recited in order every month. I myself have found that monthly recitation is far too much, I simply can't cope with so much emotional truth. I use a (fairly erratic and approximate) three- or four-month cycle. But the modern view is really poverty-stricken. For example, most Anglicans hear parts of (usually somewhat garbled) psalms once a week.

2.5 "Songs in the Night"

The Book of Psalms teaches us how to pour out our hearts to God, individually and together. Rooted in the experience and history of the Israelites and the Jews, and expressing the security and truth of the everlasting arms and faithful lovingkindness of our God, they put us closely in touch with God's impossibilities. Not least of which is his ability and willingness to "turn" us back to his way.

We will expand below (§6) on the History psalms, but many other psalms are explicitly historically based, according to their superscriptions, and all of them are rooted in real

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13 Recorded in passing as an Antioch tradition by Socrates Scholasticus (also known as Socrates of Constantinople, born there c.380AD) in his Historia Ecclesiastica.
14 Tertullian (c.160 – c.220), Apologeticus. Tertullian was North African and wrote in Latin (but unlike Augustine was fluent in Greek). He was the first to give our understanding of the Trinity ("three persons, one substance") and Augustine treated him with great respect. Wikipedia says that, "Among his apologetic writings, the Apologeticus, addressed to the Roman magistrates, is a most pungent defense of Christianity and the Christians against the reproaches of the pagans, and an important legacy of the ancient Church, proclaiming the principle of freedom of religion as an inalienable human right: it demands a fair trial for Christians before they are condemned to death."
15 For this we have the witness of Chrysostom (347-407)
16 The Council of Nicea (587) ruled that bishops must "know the Psalter thoroughly"
17 Jerome (c.347-420), Epistle 46 written from Bethlehem to Marcella
18 And "Fellowship" (house church) people don't traditionally make a point of Scripture reading in their meetings at all, except by the preacher, let alone reciting the psalms. Thankfully that is now changing a little. Note the terminology. "Meeting" is not the same as "service" (liturgy). I know what the NT implications of liturgy are, but I can't find anything relevant for meeting. Acts 16:40 refers to meeting in the NIV translation, but the Greek is seen: the church (or congregation) gathered (e.g. Acts 10:27; 12:12; 14:27, see also Acts 20:7) at a place of prayer (e.g. Acts 16:13,16)
19 The references are to: Ps.77:6 (songs in the night, see also Elihu's speech at Job 35:10 and Pss.16:7; 42:8; 63:6); Ps.62:8 (pouring out hearts, see also Pss.42:4; 142:2); sevenfold references to faithfulness and lovingkindness in Ps.89 (respectively vv.1,2,14,24,28,33,49; and vv.1,2,3,8,24,33,37), and similarly Ps.89:5 for God's wonders (his impossibilities). For turning see Ps.80:3,7,14 (and note the citation of Jer.31:18, see also §7.3 n.8), and for the Way see Pss.1:6; 5:8; 18:21,30; 119:1,5,9 etc, and Acts 9:2.
20 like Pss.78, 105, 106 and see also Neh.9:5-37 and Acts 7 for explicit historical summaries. See Chapter 5 below.
21 like Ps.137, or Ps.18 with the parallel in 2Sam.22, or Ps.68 which quotes Judges 5
historical circumstances. There is nothing purely literary about Psalms: this is not merely beautiful poetry for us to enjoy, but (often heartstoppingly beautiful) poetry to move our spirits as we let the psalmists speak for us as they, in their specific circumstances then, poured out their souls to God, their ever-present help in trouble (Ps.46:1). It is because the psalms are so historically specific that they have the force they do, and this is why I have gone into detail explaining various features of the text. The more it is understood the more force it has.

Of course, the Book of Psalms is very literary: literature is literature precisely because it is effective. If Psalms were not effective, if they were limping clichéd doggerel, who would have troubled to copy them? If no-one likes a book it is quickly forgotten. But Psalms has survived for twenty-five-hundred years, and individual poems were remembered for a millennium before that. The poems use very simple means, including rather a limited vocabulary, to make timeless and memorable poetry, able also to speak to us who live in an entirely different culture. This is extraordinary, as is the fact that the poems largely retain their impact across widely different languages (because the poetic forms used are mostly translatable; rhyme and a formal metre are not used).

We must learn to pray. We are surrounded by distraction, by the deadening soma22 of fast food and TV. But the People of God are not to sleep, instead to watch and pray23, and to work with all their might for the establishment of the Kingdom of God. And how will we recognise the Kingdom if we are unfamiliar with God's wonders?24 And even when our head tells us about these wonders, where would we find the courage to face down our nightmares without our songs in the night (Pss.42:8; 77:6)?

22 This is Aldous Huxley's imagined drug to keep the people happy in Brave New World (1932). Huxley was thinking of the a ritual drink important among the early Indo-Iranians, frequently mentioned in (for example) the Rigveda, whose Soma Mandala contains 114 hymns about its qualities. He may also have been thinking of the Greek σῶμα (soma) meaning "body", as in "the light of the body is the eye" (Matt.6:22) or "this is my body" (Lk.22:19; 1Cor.11:24ff), and also, in a usage rather closer to Huxley's meaning, "And the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her … merchandise of gold, and silver … and horses, and chariots, and slaves (σωματον, somaton)" (Rev.18:13)


24 Pss.77:11,14; 78:11; 88:10,12; 89:5; 96:3; 106:7; 107:24; 136:4
3 God's impossibilities: praise him!

As I mentioned in the Prologue, this chapter is about the exalted language of wonder that permeates the whole Book of Psalms, and I have used the idea of "impossibility" as the simplest word characterising this attitude of wonder specifically because I want to re-evaluate what is considered as reasonable. The psalmists are very bold both emotionally and intellectually. They do not hesitate to invoke extraordinary intensity, and at the same time they refuse to accept what is staring them in the face. How many times have you heard of some young fellow who did astonishing things because he was too ignorant to know that what he wanted to do was impossible?

People who turn the world upside down are those that assume that they can do what is conventionally considered impossible. This attitude is central to the psalmists.

God did many "wonders" apart from leading the people through the Sea: among many other things repeatedly giving barren women children (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, Hannah, the great lady of Shunem), bringing bread from heaven, water in the desert, and life from the dead (once for Elijah and twice for Elisha!).

But the pivotal historical occasion is the destruction of Jerusalem in 586BC, and we start by considering the response of the prophet Jeremiah to this devastating event. It is after all this event that underlies many psalms in Books III and V. Again and again God brought destruction to the people, and these bad things were just as "impossible" as the good things we mentioned just now. On the face of it, Jerusalem was impregnable – David had only taken it by stealth and it had not fallen to force in a thousand years when Nebuchadnezzar besieged it. At a deeper level, it seemed that God's foundational promise to David was at stake. Was God's word reliable or not? For Jeremiah, what was staring him in the face was the abrogation of the promise of God. And yet … Still he buys the potter's field.

"Turning the world upside down" is destructive as well as constructive, and we will not understand the psalmists unless we appreciate this deeply. In Jeremiah this is explored very explicitly at length, and with great psychological insight. The psalmists are not so explicit about it, and this is why we use an exposition of Jeremiah's prophecy to illuminate our subsequent discussion of the psalms.

Grasping the impossible is invariably challenging and exhilarating by turns. But coming to an understanding that God is both able and willing to uproot our certainties is a hard lesson to learn. Both the prophets and the psalmists are determined to come close to God, to come to an altogether larger view of the whole world and their place in it, whatever the heavy cost to them personally. We should be warned!
3.1 Impossibility and doxology

\textit{Psalms} is, before anything else, a book of poetry. The celebrated English poet Alice Oswald has said: \textit{It's impossible to combine [writing poetry] and motherhood – I have three children aged 9, 13 and 16 – but poetry starts from impossibility rather than possibility}.\textsuperscript{1} It is interesting that a modern poet should have put her finger on what is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the oldest book of poetry in continuous use in the world: if \textit{Psalms} is about anything, it is about the \textit{impossibilities} of God. And also of course, for all the psalmists, God's wonders invariably elicit praise.

Impossibility and praise. In the list of extra-Psalter psalms I have also included Jeremiah's prayer (Jer.32:17-25) on buying the potter's field, even though it is a prose passage, since it clearly has a doxological\textsuperscript{2} purpose, and we will emphasise that the Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is "\textit{Praises}". Moses sings in his last psalm: \textit{underneath are the everlasting arms} (Deut.33:27); and underlining all the psalmists' work there is this attitude of praising God. Amid toil, trouble, sorrow and lament, \textit{praises} remain; however much the psalmists complain, they never forget to add praises.

I shall show that doxology is central to our Christian \textit{ontology} (how we know who we are), to our Christian \textit{epistemology} (how we know what we know), and even to our biblical \textit{hermeneutics} (how we know what the biblical text means). Knowing how to praise God is the same as knowing everything, and I use \textit{knowing} in the Biblical sense (Gen.3:7, 22; 4:1); Biblically, the \textit{understanding} is located in the heart not the head.\textsuperscript{3}

Impossibility and praise. Jeremiah's prayer starts with the impossibilities that for God are possible. Jeremiah sees judgement coming only too clearly, a terrible judgement that would overwhelm the people just as it overwhelmed the impregnable fortress of Jerusalem: a judgement that stripped away all ontological certainties from Israel and left them destitute – naked and helpless in the hands of their enemies. It was \textit{impossible} to take Jerusalem: \textit{The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the peoples of the world, that enemies and foes could enter the gates of Jerusalem}. (Lam.4:12). But God would bring the unthinkable thing to pass: Jeremiah saw it clearly, and later wept bitterly over the execution of judgement :-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Interview in \textit{The Guardian}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} October 2012. Oswald (b.1966) has won the Forward Poetry prize for best first collection, and the T.S.Eliot award in 2002 for \textit{Dart} (the river in Devon). Her most recent work, \textit{Memorial} (2011), reworks Homer's \textit{Iliad}. She performed \textit{Paradise Lost} (Milton, 1667 & 1674) in Totnes in summer 2012. By contrast, over half of \textit{Psalms} predates Homer by at least 200 years, and several psalms predate him by significantly longer; one – Ps.90 (by Moses) – by at least 800 years!
\item doxology, from the Greek: \textit{δοξα (doxa)} – glory, \textit{λόγος (logos)} – speaking. \textit{"The Doxology"} is a liturgical formula traditionally used after reading every Psalm in the church service: \textit{"Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning is now and ever will be, Amen"}.
\item Platonic dualism is not Biblical, in fact, it is emphatically anti-Biblical. Christian epistemology is founded on the physical: \textit{Taste and see! See me! Handle me! Hear me!} (Ps.34:8; Luke 24:39; 1John 1:1; Deut.4:10; 2Chron.34:27; Mark 7:14 etc). Biblically, we \textit{hear} with our \textit{hearts} (a serendipitous pun in English) but the five senses are located in the head: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and the lips (for touching, Song 1:2). One might think that the fingers are for touch, but babies show that the lips are primary.
\end{itemize}

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How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! 
  How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! …
Bitterly she weeps at night; tears are on her cheeks. 
  Among all her lovers there is no one to comfort her. …
The LORD is like an enemy: he has swallowed up Israel. 
  He has swallowed up all her palaces and destroyed her strongholds. 
  He has multiplied mourning and lamentation for Daughter Judah. …
My eyes fail from weeping; I am in torment within; 
  my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed …
To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you, 
  Virgin Daughter Zion? 
  Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you? …
How the gold has lost its lustre, the fine gold become dull! 
  The sacred gems are scattered at every street corner. 
  How the precious children of Zion, once worth their weight in gold, 
  are now considered as pots of clay, the work of a potter’s hands! 
  Even jackals offer their breasts to nurse their young, 
  but my people have become heartless like ostriches in the desert …
Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning. 
  The crown has fallen from our head.  
  Woe to us, for we have sinned! …
Because of these things our eyes grow dim for Mount Zion, 
  which lies desolate, with jackals prowling over it.

Lamentations 1:1f; 2:5, 11, 13; 4:1ff, 10; 5:15ff

Nevertheless: seeing all this, Jeremiah still buys the potter's field! He was seeing beyond the imminent judgement, to the continued impossibilities of God. As Peter later commented, Concerning this salvation, the prophets ... searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah ... Even angels long to look into these things (1Pet.1:10ff).

3.2 Impossibility as Covenant

Walter Brueggemann has emphasised the importance of this prayer of Jeremiah (Jer.32:17-25) in what he calls the "theological trajectory" of the question posed rhetorically to Abraham by God: "is anything impossible for me?" (Gen.18:14). 6  God repeats precisely this same question in v.27, albeit for a very different purpose. But Jeremiah, at the opening of his prayer, makes exactly the same assertion: nothing is impossible for God (v.17), in meditating on the meaning of the purchase of the potter's field.

The word used is pela 7 : this word and its cognates are found at critical places. In Moses' song of the sea, , in the first psalm of the biblical text, he says :-

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4 Such horrible events were also repeated during the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70, as reported by Josephus in The Jewish War (AD75)
5 Jeremiah here refers to the (apparent) abrogation of the Promise of God to David: your throne shall be established forever (2Sam.7:16; 1Chron.17:14)
6 Walter Brueggemann, "Impossibility" and Epistemology, ch.9 in The Psalms and the Life of the Church (ed.P.D.Miller; 1995, Fortress, Minneapolis), reprinted from Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 94 (1979) 615-634. This is a penetrating and wide-ranging essay, and I here follow Brueggemann's treatment.
7 Brueggemann notes (ibid. n.6) that "It is not obvious how this term should be translated ... [it] is translated, ['wonders', 'marvellous works'], 'too hard', 'difficult', 'extraordinary'. I have opted for rendering the term 'impossible'.
Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? 
Who is like you, majestic in holiness 
awesome in splendour, doing impossibilities? 

Ex.15:11

Then, *pele* is found at the announcement of the birth of Samson where the angel is named "impossible" (or "too wonderful", Judg.13:18) and praised as "the one who does impossibilities" (v.19). Manoah's wife was in the same position as Sarah, and on the face of it this is the story of another barren woman being transformed. But here the context of liberation is much more prominent than it was for the birth of Isaac.

In this Chapter we will try to unwrap these big ideas a little. The Bible is *"The Story of God"*, showing God's attitude to life and death, to beginnings and endings, to virtue and vice, to sorrow and joy; it displays God's intricate designs and overarching purposes; it is a record of God's passionate love for his children, and the extraordinary lengths he is willing to go to effect liberation and health* for them. Jeremiah's prose psalm in Ch.32 looks back to the impossible things God has already done – bringing life from death, victory from defeat, and liberation from slavery – at the same time that God looks forward to the impossible things that are imminent. Not only the destruction of Jerusalem was at issue – and Jerusalem was a "strong fortress", so strong it was effectively impregnable. It was the apparent destruction of the very promises of God, as is made explicit in the later lament of Ezekiel (Ch.19: "*this is a lament, and is to be used as a lament*", v.14). The purpose of Jeremiah in recording the prophesy in Ch.32 was to reiterate the promise, but to the succeeding generation it did not look like that!

Succeeding generations. The processes of sexual reproduction at a cellular level is one whose astonishing and intricate complexity is becoming more sharply defined with the recent huge advances in molecular biology. The fact that birth is a very common occurrence should not blind us to how unutterably amazing it is, at all levels. If ordinary births, being common remain amazing, special births are God's way of drawing attention to – opening our eyes to – the hand of God. Extraordinary births are a theme used in the Bible to emphasise the incomparability of God, and the deep solemnity of his covenant with us. God is for us, he is committed to us, and he gave his life for ours. But God is no respecter of persons. His ways are amazing for all of us, and there is rejoicing in heaven for every sinner who repents. With God the ordinary is extraordinary.

God's purposes may affect us in painful as well as happy ways, but we are to count it *all joy*: this is the first thing James says in his Letter (Jas.1:2)! And James knew this because it was in his bones, again and again it is the intent of the prophets, and the burden of the psalmists. Covenant permeates *Psalms*, as does praise in the Book of Praises.

Explanation is beside the point in the presence of the Impossible: we may have to wait half a millennium for an explanation! Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the psalmists of the Exile did not look for explanations which only the children of the children of their children would see; they were looking for something deeper: this is why Peter says that *they*

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9 Tyndale in his "New Testament" (1526) regularly treated "health" and "salvation" are synonyms – the one has the German root, the other the Latin – usually with a startling effect to us ("And hath reysed upp[er] the horne off healthe unto us / in the housse of his servaunt David", Luke 1:69). (But his 1534 version reverted to the Latin term – perhaps he thought that battle not worth the candle? The 1560 Geneva version uses "salvation".)
10 Josephus makes this clear in his account of the fall of Jerusalem in AD70 (The Jewish War, ~AD75). The Romans sent three legions against them, and took two years to subdue them even though the Jews were riven by bloody disunity. Most of the time of the siege of Jerusalem there were no less than three warring factions inside the city! How long would they have resisted had they been united? And the campaign of AD135 was even more costly for the Romans.
searched intently for the shape of things to come (1Pet.1:10). Why would they look for explanation when they had at that time no doctrine of the Resurrection? They wanted to know, and to know today, that their very beings were safe in God’s hand despite all appearances. As do we. They were the first existentialists. We are enriched because we can see the whole of God’s purposes, but we are impoverished by our loss of immediacy in our response to God. But they were not impoverished by the veiling of God’s purposes to their eyes because of the immediacy of their response to him.

The psalmists knew that God’s Covenant is reliable. And life-changing. And mind-blowing. It gives meaning to everything – in fact, ultimately it is the only thing that gives meaning to anything! Who are we? We are the People of the Covenant, Followers of the Way!

3.3 Impossibility as praise

Pe la is repeated many times in the history psalms: notably in the second maskil of Asaph in Book III (Ps.78)11; the two History psalms at the end of Book IV (Pss.105,106)12; and in Ps.136, the antiphonal History psalm that concludes the collection of the Songs of Ascent in Book V, which is effectively a pure doxology13.

Psalm 107, which is not exactly a History psalm but which opens Book V meditating on the sorts of things that Israel has experience of, is specifically about how we are to consider the impossibilities of God: four times in the refrain the poet echoes the earlier poet of Ps.136:

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love And his wonders to mankind Ps.107:8,15,21,31

It is because the knowledge of the wonders (impossibilities) of God is so firmly founded in the historical experience of Israel that it can be incorporated into a doxological formula – characteristically in Ps.72 (the Royal psalm which concludes Book II):

Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel Who alone does impossibilities Ps.72:18

and this sort of formula is also used in Pss.89, 96, 98, 111, 139, 145.14 But it would be the greatest of mistakes to treat these as though they were intended in a formulaic sort of way, an approach very common in modern usage. Nothing could be further from the truth! The Biblical poets never descend to cliché (despite what commentators may say): whenever they use these ideas, and each time they use them, they are intending us to hear the whole range of impossibilities we are discussing in this section. We are no longer used to reading into the text these disparate subtexts and contexts that underlie it, but we will not make substantial progress until we re-learn how to do this!

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11 The word wonders (or impossibilities) is repeated four times in vv. 4,11,12,32; note that twice Asaph credits God with doing wonders (vv. 4,12), but twice he comments pejoratively on Israel’s response. In v.11 they forgot, and in v.32 they refused to believe.

12 Psalm 105 celebrates the impossible ways (vv.2,5) God saved Israel from Pharaoh; Ps.106 shows Israel forgetting (vv.7,22) these same impossibilities.

13 The first verse after the initial three-fold naming of God (v.4), gives God’s first characteristic as "the one who alone does impossibilities" (or "great wonders")

14 Ps.89 concludes Book III. Pss.96 & 98 are both derivative of the original psalm that Book IV expands (1Chron.16:8-36); Ps.111 is the first of the pair of acrostics that immediately follow the hugely important Ps.110 and treat, respectively, the righteousness of God and the righteousness of the godly man, and Pss.139, 145 (the latter another acrostic) bracket the David collection that immediately follows the lament of Ps.137 and precedes the collection of Hallelujah psalms that concludes the whole Book.
To recognise the impossibilities that God effects is to praise him: it is only when we are able to start to glimpse his impossibilities that our praises can even start to be adequate. And not to recognise them – the fatal mistake of Pharaoh! – is to actively deny him praise, a very dangerous course! These are not abstract ideas, nor should they be merely a reciting of traditions (which is what some of the History psalms may sound like to our jaded ears). As God has acted in the past, so can he act today! It is the immediacy of our response to God – and of his response to us – that is of the essence! We have to open our eyes, or, more properly, be willing to let God open our eyes as he did for Elisha's servant (2Kings 6:17).

3.4 Impossibility and the incomparability of God

I have just referred to Ps.89, the terrifying lament that closes Book III, and similar references to God's impossibilities are also found in other complaint psalms;\(^\text{15}\) in all of them the poets have in mind the same understanding that moved Jeremiah. Brueggemann comments in a passage worth quoting at length that the double references to God's impossibilities in this prayer of Jeremiah (Jer.32:17-25 and following) both positively as an assertion in faith by Jeremiah (v.17) and negatively as a rhetorical question by God (v.27) is:-

… especially instructive. The double use affirms that YHWH can cause two kinds of impossibility that [apparently]\(^\text{16}\) violate reason. YHWH can cause endings to what is valued, and YHWH can cause newness not to be imagined. In both ways the presumed world of Judah, like the presumed world of Abraham and Sarah, is shown to be much more provisional, and much more subject to radical unanticipated transformation, than had been thought either in groundless despair or in false security.

W. Brueggemann (ibid. n.6) p.175

God brought destruction on Jerusalem in 586 BC, according to his purposes. This was a catastrophe for Judah at the time, and they experienced it as catastrophe both absolutely and as a deeply debilitating overturning of their worldview. But one way or another, God brings into being those things that are not (Rom.4:17): he does impossibilities! In particular, it seems to me that the standard biblical text that we now have was finalised during the Exile in Babylon. The remnant of Israel entered Babylon speaking Hebrew and nursing delusions of grandeur, and the Jews\(^\text{17}\) returned to Jerusalem seventy years later speaking Aramaic and holding the Torah in their hands. There was an ending of the old Israel and a beginning of the new Jewish nation, synagogues\(^\text{18}\) and all.

Our domesticated reason is inclined to embrace what is real in terms of what the world tells us is possible. But when the world tells us what is possible, and we accept it, then the real is already characterised and closely circumscribed. Beginning with what is possible, Isaac could not be born, the Israelites could not be liberated from the Philistines. Israel could not be ended or begun again. Discipleship is not possible. Mountains cannot be moved, and the dead cannot be raised.

W. Brueggemann (ibid. n.6) p.183

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\(^{15}\) Ps.9, 26, 40, 71, 75, 77, 86. In Book I. Ps.9 is the first psalm of the acrostic formed by the pair Pss.9&10. Ps.26 follows and is related to the acrostic Ps.25 (eg. cp. 25:2 with 26:1 and 25:3-4 with 26:2-3). Ps.40 is a Proper Psalm for Good Friday. Ps.71 is the penultimate psalm of Book II, and is one of the few places outside Isaiah that the appellation "Holy One of Israel" is used of God. Pss. 75 and 77 are both in the Asaph collection in Book III, and Ps.86 is the only David psalm in Book III. Brueggemann was writing in 1979 when the nature and limitations of rationality were not widely appreciated, even in the mathematical and physical communities. God's wisdom may look like foolishness to men, but that is only because they are unwise.

\(^{16}\) Esther 2:5 refers to "Jeus"; Daniel 3:12 (in Aramaic) refers to "Jeus"; Ezra 4:12 (in a Hebrew text reporting an Aramaic one) refers to "Jeus", and Neh.1:2 speaks of the "Jewish remnant".

\(^{17}\) Note that the reference to "synagogues" in the KJV of Ps.74:8, the first maskil of Asaph in Book III, is a mis-translation, and cannot be used to support a late date for this Psalm. Crucially, the LXX translators (and they should have known!) render the verse "Come, let us cause the feasts of the Lord to cease out of the land"
But all of these things are possible! Our God is incomparable precisely because, where other religions amount to an apology for the status quo, our God systematically and fundamentally challenges it.

There is also another reason. It used to be fashionable to represent Judaism as "just another Middle-Eastern religion", with many continuities and similarities with the Canaanite, Hittite, Phoenician and other religions of the region. Although this belief is still common popularly, it has fallen out of scholarly favour, for good reason. For example, many scholars proposed that Ps.29 was a translation or close adaptation of a Canaanite psalm, where not YHWH but Baal, the thunder-god, imposes his awesome voice over the whole world. Robert Alter explains this idea, but peremptorily dismisses it:-

Canaanite poetry was the literary tradition that constituted the most immediate background to biblical poetry. It would be surprising if the biblical poets did not make use of images, phrasing, and even mythological elements from the antecedent tradition with which they and their audience were acquainted. The relation of this psalm [29], and a good many others, to the Syro-Palestinian tradition is roughly like that of Paradise Lost [Milton, 1667], to the Aeneid [29BC-19BC: Virgil] and the Iliad [=700BC: Homer]. Virgil and Homer gave Milton a model, and a repertory of devices and topoi [a term of classical Greek rhetoric meaning, roughly, "commonplaces"], with which he could frame a cosmic epic from his own monotheistic perspective, but he was not merely "transposing" the pagan epic poets into English. Robert Alter, The Book of Psalms (2007), Ps.29

Brueggemann points out that, just as vague assertions of dependence of Biblical with prior pagan poetry cannot be supported on close examination, so the more generalised assertion of familial similarity between Israelite and Canaanite (and other) religions also falls down. He says that "there is a decisive difference between the perennial religion and the claims of the gospel. And that contrast is to be found precisely in the recharacterisation of what is possible and impossible :-

Basically, the horizon of archetypes and repetition cannot be transcended with impunity unless we accept a philosophy of freedom that does not exclude God. And indeed this proved to be true when the horizon of archetypes and repetitions was transcended, for the first time, by Judeo-Christianism, which introduced a new category into religious experience, the category of faith. It must not be forgotten that, if Abraham's faith can be defined as for God everything is possible [Gen.18:14], the faith of Christianity implies that everything is also possible for men [Mk.10:27]."

W. Brueggemann (ibid. n.6) p.184

Brueggemann insists, citing Karl Barth20, that reality takes priority over theological questions of the possibility of God. Never mind what we think He could do or who we think He might be; what do we know about Him? What have we seen? What have we heard? What have our hands handled? What has He said? We must not in our imaginations allow God to be "held captive" to cultural definitions of the possible.

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20 K.Barth, Church Dogmatics 2/2:13
The doxological, polemical assertion that God does what the world regards as impossible may be a scandal to our reason as well as to our economics. But the other side of that scandal is that it asserts ground for a real gospel, a genuine hope, and an authentic emancipation from the definitional worlds that enslave …

… Who decides what is possible? And is it possible to redecide that matter? This radical tradition asks of the believing community that it redecide about what is possible, not on the basis of our captured reason (which goes along with our captured politics and captured economics) but on the basis of the Real One to whom we profess allegiance and of whom we make confession. The entire tradition asserts that the possible is pre-empted by the real – real even if judged by other standards as "impossible". W. Brueggemann, *ibid.* (n.6) p.182f

As C.S.Lewis sagely points out, Aslan is not a tame lion. God is not like the gods:

Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments

Gen.35:2; cp. Jos.24:23; Jud.10:16; 1 Sam.7:3

Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?

Ex.15:11

Among the gods there is none like unto thee, O Lord; neither are there any works like unto thy works

Ps.86:8

Our God is incomparable, whose wonders are designed, not to impress us – what could be easier? – but to change the face of reality itself.

3.5 *Impossibility and the revelation of God's purposes*

So. What does Gabriel say to Mary?

Nothing is impossible [αδύνατες, adunaties] with God

Lk.1:37

Is it possible that either Luke or Mary – or even the angel! – were unaware of God's questions to Abraham, to Samson's mother, to Hannah, to Jeremiah? Curiously, Mary emphasises this understanding in her psalm of praise, saying :-

The Mighty One [ο δυνατος, o dunatos] hath done great things for me … he hath put down the mighty [δυναστες, dunastas] from their seats

Lk.1:49,52

But Jesus affirms, to the double astonishment of his disciples, that even the rich may enter heaven since:

… for man it is impossible [αδυνατον, adunaton] but all things are possible [δυνατα, dunata] for God

Mk.10:27

Not only this, but he continues to multiply his disciples' astonishment by insisting that :-

"Nothing will be impossible [αδυνατησαι, adunatesei] to you!"

Matt.17:21

The temptation is to relax and enjoy these happy impossibilities. But God is serious about redeeming us from our wickedness, and (as we will see in detail later) there will come a time of judgement. And God reserves the right to bring judgement on anyone at any time, to bring his purposes into effect. The double impossibility we have seen in the book of Jeremiah is repeated in the New Testament; in the Garden Jesus says to the Father :-

My Father, if it is possible [δυνατον, dunaton], may this cup be taken from me …

My Father, if it is not possible [δυναται, dunatai] …

Matt.26:39, 42

Our Lord knows that everything is indeed possible for God, but, as for Jeremiah, it is through the unthinkable that God brings the impossible into being. And again, as for Jeremiah, Jerusalem itself is at stake in these impossible things, where God brings into being those things that are not. Jesus vicariously accepts the judgement of God, which is a
symbol, a forerunner or foretaste of the terrible judgement that will fall on the Jews in AD70 when the Temple is indeed destroyed, together with Jerusalem and the whole nation. He poses the question, "if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" (Luke 23:31), and the vengeance of Rome on Israel in AD70 is truly appalling. But this is the only way the Church could be born, the only way to bring the salvation of God to the nations: the Temple had to be destroyed!

God's wonders, his mighty works, his impossibilities, his dynamism: these are essential to the Good News of God, and appreciation of them is essential to our authentic response to God. And we have to appreciate them whether they are pleasant to us, or perhaps not so pleasant! This is why it is so important we see that God's impossibilities, his dynamism, are indeed the essential stuff of the Book of Psalms: the psalmists know and sing of all sides of them – that is why only some of the psalms are happy, and why many of them are all about the enemy!

3.6 Postscript: miracles and the supernatural

This sub-section is a general philosophical comment on miracles, the idea of which may have been brought to the mind of readers by the foregoing discussion of God's impossibilities. There is a parallel physical and mathematical argument of which in the 21st century we should be aware, but this is really outside the scope of the present book and can only be hinted at, with the main points merely sketched in the footnotes.

Many faithful people seem to think that God is God because he does miracles, and that Jesus was God because he did miracles too. And many lazy and careless materialist commentators today think that the Bible and the Christian faith are characterised by miracles, epiphanœmena (they think) in the same class as the tooth fairy and Father Christmas. Religious people see fairies at the bottom of the garden, and (these commentators think) faith is about believing things without (or even better, despite) evidence. The religious depend on the supernatural, but in this materialist world-view the supernatural doesn't exist since the natural world is all there is. Miracles, like magic, are an illusion, and religion is the opium of the people.

*Miracle* has a Latin root, as does supernatural, and the connotations of these words today include many ideas which are pagan, not Biblical. In the King James Version, "Miracle" translates three Hebrew words (occurring only 5 times) and two Greek words (occurring 31 times). The various English words used in KJV to translate these five words in the ancient text show that the ancient authors were evoking a range of ideas (see details

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21 "Religion is the opium of the people" is the famous dictum of Karl Marx. Of course, Marx was quite right: religion can, and frequently is, used as an opium. Marx has become unfashionable again, so I am at liberty to comment that the Marxist critique of society is in many ways similar to Jesus Christ's critique of society (although of course his solution is quite different!). And this is because Marx was firmly rooted in his Christian heritage. His analysis of alienation is only expanding on St. Paul, just as one example. Interestingly, the full quote is from Deutsch–Französische Jahrbücher (Karl Marx and Arnold Ruge. Paris, February 1844) and is: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people".

22 Heb. owth: translated variously as mark, miracle, sign or token – probably coming from a primitive root meaning to assent, indicating that the events compelled assent in some way; movpheth or mopheth: translated variously as miracle, sign, wonder (or wondered at) – coming from a primitive root meaning to be bright (or, by implication, beautiful); and pela, discussed extensively above.

23 Gr. dunamis: translated variously as ability, abundance, meaning, might (as in mighty deed or mighty work), miracle, power, strength, violence; semeon: translated variously as miracle, sign, token, wonder.
in the footnotes, and of course the Biblical text itself), none of which really correspond to the normal modern use of *miracle*.

To the modern mind, a miracle is the fracturing of normality by the supernatural, and the significance of a miracle is as evidence of the supernatural world. These ideas are ultimately incoherent, and it is thoroughly anachronistic to apply them to the ancient texts. Modern discussion of miracles is conditioned by Hume's characterisation of them as *law-breaking events*: miracles require the laws of nature to be suspended.

But the very idea of a *law of nature* is Christian! It is because God is rational and not capricious, because "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps.19:1), that we reached the idea of a *law of nature* in the first place. In Psalm 19, David is meditating on Gen.1:14; the appointment by God of the sun, moon and stars as his cosmic timekeepers. He is asserting the *overarching purposes* of God, which is the reason in the second half of the psalm that he continues his meditation by asserting that God's law is life (v.7)! On the one hand are God's purposes, on the other is our response to them.

Is the natural world *all there is*? The distinction between the natural and the supernatural is a Christian one, for whom the universe is contingent upon God's creative work, so that God is other than the world. God caused the universe, speaking it into existence. But God is not contingent; he is, necessarily. Materialists find it very difficult to think outside their material box. In particular, they find it hard to imagine an uncontingent being. Consequently, they rarely talk coherently about the supernatural.

From a physical point of view, some aspects of the situation seem to be very clear, and others entirely opaque. Our Universe was created some 13 billion years ago at the Big Bang event. And because both space and time were created together and are inextricably linked, it makes no physical sense to speak of before the Big Bang. There was no before, since there was no time (since it had not been created). So what caused the Universe? There are many speculations by physicists today about multiverses and oscillating universes etc, but these remain entirely speculative, and in any case leave unresolved all the philosophical questions about the first cause. The physical universe is a very puzzling place, and the more we look the more puzzling it becomes. We understand the Big Bang event pretty well at a basic level: the theorem of Penrose and Hawking guarantees a gravitational singularity, and given the event itself we can calculate the evolution of the universe to today in general terms. The cosmic microwave background (the signature of the "Recombination" event at about 200,000 years after the Big Bang) is understood in great detail, as is stellar nucleosynthesis. Quantum Mechanics is the most successful and most fantastically accurate physical theory to date. However, no-

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24 David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Section X "Of Miracles".
25 Augustine was the first to say this c.400 AD (Confessions Book XI ¶30; *City of God* Book XI ch.6) of which the most coherent I have seen is by Roger Penrose in his latest brilliant book *Cycles of Time* (2010), which I have reviewed on the Amazon UK site.
26 The best treatment of this I have found is in Keith Ward's elegant and philosophical book, *Why there almost certainly is a God* (2008).
27 See Stephen Weinberg's classical *The First Three Minutes* (1977), and John C. Mather's account in *The Very First Light*, 1996.
28 See Stephen Weinberg's classical *The First Three Minutes* (1977), and John C. Mather's account in *The Very First Light*, 1996.
one fundamentally understands the Quantum Mechanics: there is as yet no coherent formalism covering the "collapse of the wavefunction" process which underlies all events. Moreover, the only place where General Relativity and the Quantum Mechanics meet (in the current treatment) is in Black Holes, those curious places where anything seems possible and almost nothing is properly understood. And significantly, we can on the one hand weigh the Universe, and on the other count the number of photons and particles in it, but the two measurements are not consistent with each other: there seems to be a large cosmic quantity of stuff of whose identity we are currently entirely ignorant.

It makes little sense to speak philosophically of the "material world" since we really don't yet know precisely what "material" is. Sensibly, we should speak of the "observable world"; but then the purposes of man are also observable and we currently have no formal physical basis for the existence of purpose, just as we currently have no formal physical basis for the inescapable fact of consciousness. The materialists make the philosophical

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32 Most physicists today believe the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum mechanics, but no-one understood it better than Richard Feynman, who famously said (p.9 of QED): "... will you understand what I'm going to tell you? ...No, you're not going to be able to understand it. ...I don't understand it. Nobody does."

33 This is Roger Penrose's view, which he has explained in detail and exceptionally elegantly in his The Road to Reality (2004).

34 The Bekenstein-Hawking expression for the entropy of a black hole is $\frac{1}{2}\pi k c^3 A/Gh$ where $k$ is Boltzmann's constant, $c$ is the speed of light, $A$ is the surface area of the black hole's event horizon, $G$ is Newton's gravitational constant and $h$ is Planck's constant. Boltzmann was the giant of nineteenth century physics who established the idea of entropy. Einstein established the cosmic significance of the speed of light in 1905, it was Newton who really started modern physics in the seventeenth century when he established our view of gravity from Kepler's seminal interpretation of the elliptical orbits of the planets using Tycho's observations, and it was Planck who in 1901 resolved the long-standing problem of the ultra-violet catastrophe by quantising radiation. Roger Penrose comments on the Bekenstein-Hawking expression: "... this entropy is a quantum-gravitational effect. Indeed, this is the first place where we have encountered both the fundamental constant of quantum mechanics (Planck's constant) and that of general relativity (Newton's constant) appearing together in the same formula" (The Road to Reality, 2005: §27.10, p.715).

35 There is estimated to be about $10^{74}$ protons in the Universe, and about $10^9$ photons per proton (the latter number is derived quite simply by Steve Weinberg in The First Three Minutes), with the proportions of the other elements known quite well. But this baryonic matter only accounts for a rather small fraction of the mass of the Universe, as descibed in detail by Michael Rowan-Robinson in The Nine Numbers of the Cosmos, 1999.

36 Michael Frayn has investigated this at length in his book The Human Touch (2006). One of the issues Frayn considers is the idea of "law of nature", the history of which he explores, mostly in the context of the quantum mechanics. He cites Edgar Zilsel, The genesis of the concept of physical law, Philosophical Review 51 (ed. Cornell: New York 1951), who identifies Descartes as the author of this usage, in Discourse on Method (1637), in which he says that he has "observed certain natural laws established in nature by God in such a manner ... that they are accurately observed in all that exists ... in the world". It seems clear that Zilsel did not consider the contribution of the mediæval scientists, who firmly established the metaphysical basis of the modern scientific enterprise, as shown in a very useful survey by James Hannam, "God's Philosophers: how the medieval world laid the foundations for modern science" (2009). This dependence of modern science on the mediæval world is well illustrated by Newton's famous comment to Robert Hooke in a letter of 1676: "If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants". What is not so well known is that Newton was quoting Bernard of Chartres (who died c.1130). I note, parenthetically, that the term "mediæval scientist" is itself certainly anachronistic, since the word "scientist" was introduced by William Whewell in 1833 in analogy to the term "artist".

37 Roger Penrose is famous for making suggestions about consciousness requiring a quantum mechanical description in his The Emperor's New Mind (1989), repeated and elaborated a little in The Road to Reality (ibid). Penrose's specific suggestion involving neural microtubules has recently been ruled out by Reimers, McKenmish, McKenzie, Mark, and Hush ("Penrose-Hameroff orchestrated objective-reduction proposal for human consciousness is not biologically feasible", Physical Review E 80(2)
mistake of thinking that the world can be completely known in principle (hence their dubious distinction between natural and supernatural): this was fatally undermined by Kurt Gödel in his Incompleteness Theorems. It is a logical error to think that a “Theory of Everything” is possible, even in principle! This new mathematical knowledge also fatally undermines Hume’s treatment of miracles.

There is unexpected support for this account of things from the neurobiologists. It turns out that human reason depends intrinsically on the existence of our emotions! We are used to considering that reasoning must be dispassionate to be valid, and of course, in important ways this is true. But it is not true that reason is ideally unemotional – quite the contrary! People whose emotions have been disabled are unable to operate effectively; they appear to reason well unless anything turns on their reasoning, in which case they are unable to make decisions, they are systematically purposeless, and their lives fall apart. It seems that we operate as organisms at an integrated level, and attempts to divorce "high" reason and "low" passion lead – literally – to personal disintegration.

021912, Part 1, 2009), but the same authors make other proposals ("Weak, strong, and coherent regimes of Frohlich condensation and their applications to terahertz medicine and quantum consciousness", Proceedings of the National Academy of Scientists of the USA 106(11), 4219-4224, 2009), and the general idea of quantum biological effects have been proposed by Johnjoe McFadden & Jim Al-Khalili in "A quantum mechanical model of adaptive mutation", BioSystems 50, 1999, 203–211 and elaborated by McFadden in his book Quantum Evolution (2000).

Kurt Gödel: On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems (1931, in German, and published in translation by Dover). This theorem has been reprinted (in translation) in Stephen Hawking’s book And God Made the Integers (2005). Principia Mathematica is a reference to Russell & Whitehead's magnum opus of 1910–1913 (2nd edition 1927): they believed that arithmetic could be proved to be complete, that is, every true theorem in arithmetic has a proof. Gödel proved the opposite: there exist true propositions expressible in arithmetic that have no proof! In particular, Gödel showed how to construct the statement, "This statement is unprovable", as a well-formed (and therefore valid) arithmetical expression, thereby demonstrating its truth and hence proving his theorem. It was subsequently proved (by Church) that important parts of Turing's work on computability ("Turing machines") turn out to be mathematically equivalent to this theorem of Gödel's.

It is interesting to note that Gödel tried to arithmetise Anselm's Ontological Argument (which, if successful, would have proved it!). Anselm's argument for the existence of God goes like this: "God is that which nothing greater can be conceived. But existence is greater than illusion. Therefore God exists" (Proslogion, c.1170). This argument has puzzled philosophers ever since, and the grounds on which it was rejected by them (for example, famously, Immanuel Kant) are fallacious. Bertrand Russell said of it that "it is easier to feel convinced that it must be fallacious than it is to find out precisely where the fallacy lies" (A History of Western Philosophy, 1961). I mention the Ontological Argument because it is formally a self-referencing argument and therefore has the same logical structure as Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem (which is why Gödel tried to formalise it – see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%B6del%27s_ontological_proof). A 12th century Christian theologian here is using the same type of logical argument as the best of 20th century mathematicians!

John D. Barrow has explored this whole deep topic of impossibly and Gödel's theorems in Impossibility: the limits of science and the science of limits (OUP, 1998).

See Antonio Damasio, Descartes' Error (1994; 2nd ed. 2005) where he goes into detail about a number of cases, including that of Phineas Gage (1823–1860; this was re-analysed by H.Damasio, T. Grabowski, R. Frank, A.M. Galaburda, A.R. Damasio, "The return of Phineas Gage: clues about the brain from the skull of a famous patient", Science 264, 1994, 1102–5), in which the inability of the damaged patient to operate effectively at the personal level can be directly correlated with the site of their brain damage. The peculiar thing with these patients that have lost their emotions is that they can pass IQ tests with flying colours and apparently reason flawlessly, and yet they behave irrationally. We are, therefore we think (contradicting Descartes' cogito ergo sum). Mind apparently must be properly incarnated in body to work. Therefore we speak of the "incarnation" of Christ, and the "passion" of Jesus.

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To conclude then, when the Biblical authors speak of events that we now represent as "miracles", they are always drawing our attention to the purposes of God, and of the way God sees our activities. It was Pharaoh who hardened his heart when he boasted:

I will pursue, I will overtake them
I will divide the spoils, I will gorge myself upon them
I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy them

Ex.15:9

But Moses sang:

You blew with your breath and the sea covered them
They sank like lead in the mighty waters
Who among the gods is like you O LORD?
Who is like you; majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders
You stretched out your hand and the earth swallowed them
In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed
In your strength you will guide them

Ex.15:10ff

It was in response to Pharaoh hardening his own heart against the purposes of God that decided God to bring his judgement against Pharaoh! "Let God arise", sings David, quoting Moses :-

Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered
Ps.68:1; Num.10:35

and the Sons of Korah respond :-

God has gone up with a shout; the LORD with the sounding of trumpets"
Ps.47:5

What is miraculous about a miracle is not that it "suspends" the "laws of nature". Why should God suspend his own laws? And anyway, at a completely natural level the "laws" are only a description of what happens. The miracle lies in the overturning of our ideas of what is possible, in our recognition that the Maker of heaven and earth cares enough about us to stretch out his hand in his unfailing love to work wonders for the people he has redeemed, and in our responding to this new reality.

The psalmists understood this very well, and have deliberately composed their poems to help their people (us!) respond to the God who thinks of them :-

Many, O LORD my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done
and thy thoughts which are to us-ward
Ps.40:5
4 Date and structure, authorship and superscriptions

Most scholars seem to believe that the Psalter, the Book of Psalms (Psalms) was mostly composed not very long before the Babylonian Exile (6th century BC). But the superscriptions (see §4.1) suggest a much earlier date for many of the psalms: David was around 1000BC and Moses may have been as early as 1600 BC. Despite the disbelief of the scholars in such early dates for the composition of individual psalms, I have been able to find little evidence to rule them out, or even to make them unlikely. What is clear is that the book itself was put together in its present form during or shortly after the Exile (or perhaps during the turbulence leading up to it). I argue later (§9.7) that Ps.118 can be dated 444BC.

As we have it, Psalms has 150 poems. But the ancient manuscripts do not all agree about the boundaries between the poems. For example, Pss. 9 & 10 are together a (rather incomplete) acrostic and appear as a single psalm in the LXX1 and (Vulgate).2 Similarly, Pss. 42 & 43 have a common refrain and read as a unity: however, in this case all the Ancient Versions maintain the division between them. The LXX (and Vulgate) further join Pss. 114 & 115 and join Pss. 147 & 148 but divide Ps.116, maintaining the total number of 150 psalms.

The 150 psalms are deliberately divided into five books (echoing the five books of the Torah), with the books each containing respectively 41, 31, 17, 17 and 44 psalms as follows3:

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1 LXX: the "Septuagint". The Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (what we now know as the Old Testament, including the Apocrypha) prepared in Alexandria mostly in the 3rd and 2nd century BC by (allegedly) seventy (or 72) Jewish scholars. II Maccabees must have been included after 161BC since it concludes with the defeat then of the Syrian general Nicanor BC by Judas Maccabees. IV Maccabees on the other hand was ascribed by Eusebius (q.v.) to Josephus, not now generally accepted, but it certainly predates the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD.

LXX (in some version) was used systematically by the Christians, with many NT quotations clearly following the Greek rather than the Hebrew text (eg. Heb.10:6ff), and in fact can be used as a dictionary to translate Old Testament (Hebrew) terms into New Testament (Greek) ones. So in Acts 2:21 Peter uses the Greek Κυρίου (Kyriou, Lord, clearly referring to Jesus) to translate the Hebrew YHWH (LORD) of the Joel prophesy. This means that there was a high Christology right at the start of Christianity, contrary to much scholarly speculation in the 20th century.

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2 The point here is a) LXX was used by first century Christians and therefore has significant (I would say, canonical) authority, and b) LXX was 2nd century BC and therefore depended on much earlier Hebrew texts than are extant today. The Hebrew texts we have may represent later editorial decisions (as the Masoretic text certainly does: we know that the LXX translators also interpreted). In the same way, Jerome's powerful and brilliant 4th century Latin translation (the "Vulgate") again used much earlier texts than are extant today. Jerome's version started as a translation of the LXX, but he was the first to use the Hebrew. His Psalms numbering followed the LXX. But I do not know if he would have preferred to have renumbered Psalms in accordance with his Hebrew text. Even then, the power of tradition was strong!

3 Note that 41, 31 and 17 are all prime numbers, and 44 = 2² x 11 is centred on a prime number (since 150 is even, one of the five books had to contain an even number of psalms!). Prime numbers construct all arithmetic, and can represent all rationality through Gödel's construction. The ancient editors would have appreciated the significance of primes notwithstanding their lack of mathematical understanding. I think they would have enjoyed the fact that these numbers 44 is the largest and 11 is the smallest. Pythagoras of Samos died c500BC: he was contemporary with our ancient editors. The Persian civilisation overthrew the Babylonian, which had not progressed, scientifically, since the age of Hammurabi, which was around the time of Moses. But the Greeks were aware of Babylonian arithmetical practice.

The LXX numbering would give us the number of psalms in each Book respectively as: 40, 31, 17, 17, 45. This is not nearly so numerically satisfying, and the two numberings may
It might be objected that the dating of the psalms (and Psalms) does not affect the response to them today of the people of God, and does not affect how the Spirit prompts our hearts by this sacred literature. Is it not entirely academic? Why should we care?

These are good questions, the answers to which inform our entire discussion here. For Christians (and Jews too!), God and his salvation are not together an existentialist narrative we have constructed for our comfort. And this so-called "academic" enquiry is not the sort of noisome post-modern deconstruction we deplore. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is nothing if it is not historical, and our Lord's Gospel is firmly rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus was a Jew, and a proper response to him depends on a worldview conditioned by the Hebrew Scriptures. Christians must always approach the Scriptures historically; the historicity of the Scriptures is an essential component of our ontological and epistemological security! Of course, this is not to devalue spiritual and devotional approaches to the same texts, nor need everyone necessarily engage at this sort of level, but the Church does need some to do it. After all, few people understand how their mobile phones work: but we all understand the need for the scientists and engineers who do!

4.1 The superscriptions

The superscriptions of the psalms are interesting. So, for example, that of Ps.18:

"For the director of music. Of David the servant of the LORD. He sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said:"

Ps.18:0 (New International Version)

In Robert Alter's translation this superscription reads:

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correspond with the distinction between the Hellenic period (which saw the major and brilliant flowering of Greek mathematics) and the Hellenistic period (of subsequent consolidation).

A final comment on this numerology: I interpret the 153 fishes of John (21:11) as being a reference to this division of the Psalms. $153 = 3^2 \times 17$ represents a completion of the central Books of Psalms; the Book of Sorrows and the Book of the Confidence of the King, both mixed with the love of God (whose number is 3).

In modern times this was first forcefully insisted on by Geza Vermes, Jesus the Jew (1973; Collins, London), a startling book at the time. Vermes has made an important contribution, although his detailed exegesis (he thought that Jesus was a "wandering Hasid" and that Christianity as we now have it was essentially the creation of Paul) has been heavily criticised by N.T.Wright in many works, in particular Jesus and the Victory of God (1996).

Modern editions of the Masoretic text often number the superscriptions separately, as for this psalm. But our numbering (which follows Geneva, 1660) ignores the superscription which I have therefore numbered here as zero. Robert Alter's translation, which sticks very closely to the Masoretic text, was The Guardian's "Book of the Week" in December 2007. His translation principle was to translate as literally as English permitted, retaining as much of the metre as possible – something not really attempted before. The commentary shows that although he is a "liberal" scholar, he has an enormous respect for the text, always marking where he deviates from the Masoretic text, and why; and always keeping such deviations minimal. He is a very conservative translator who intends to demonstrate the poetic power of the received text, in its coherence and unity; in this I think he succeeds magnificently. I will give significant weight to his commentary.
"For the lead player, for the LORD's servant, for David, who spoke to the LORD the words of this song on the day the LORD saved him from the grasp of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. And he said:"

Ps.18:0 (Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 2007)

This comparison highlights large problems of interpretation in *Psalms*. What is meant by all these terms? Alter (who is unwilling to acknowledge David as author) regularly renders such headers as "A David Psalm", since he points out that:

The traditional rendering is "a psalm of David", which tends to imply authorship. The Hebrew preposition ל is ambiguous. It could mean "of" or "by"; it often means "belonging to". Another common meaning is "for" or it might refer to something as loose as "in the manner of". The choice of translation is intended to preserve these ambiguous possibilities. Robert Alter, *ibid.*

Alter is very keen to avoid interpreting the text by the eliding of ambiguity, and this is one reason I like his version. Poetry is always hard to translate, precisely because the poet invariably wants to use the richness of his language, in which ambiguity is essential. When we read the psalms we must have an attitude of open-hearted respect for the text. How else can God speak to us? It is worth pointing out that if talented modern translators see ambiguity in the text, the original ancient editors must also have seen it, and maintained it from their sources. I shall show evidence that these ancient editors kept scrupulously close to their texts.

Against modern scholarly opinion (which I will criticise specifically in the course of the work), the "David" psalms are universally and traditionally thought to be composed by David himself, and this is entirely consistent with the subjects and styles of the David psalms: as well as the narrative texts of the Chroniclers who even call David the "sweet singer of Israel" (2Sam.23:1). I shall assume, unless there is real evidence to the contrary, that the "David Psalms" are actually composed by King David, and similarly for Solomon, Moses, Asaph etc.

There was previously a scholarly opinion that the superscriptions were a later interpolation: on these grounds for example the *New English Bible* omitted them altogether! It is now acknowledged that there is absolutely no manuscript evidence for this opinion, and the superscriptions should be given the same weight as the rest of the text. However, the psalm numbering as such is not in the original text, and there is manuscript evidence for some psalm pairs (Pss.9 & 10 or 42 & 43) to be joined.

Kirkpatrick6 claims that the language of Ps.145, with the remarkable superscription: "a David song of praise" (Alter's translation), is "unquestionably late". I cannot assess this claim, but Alter points out that this superscription is unique in the Book of Psalms. Song of praise renders the Hebrew tehilah, which in its plural (Tehilim) is the Hebrew title of the Book of Psalms (thus: Praises). Ps.145 is the first of the collection of six Praise psalms that conclude the whole book. It is also an acrostic (q.v. below), a form introduced by David. It may be that this is the exception that proves the rule. The editors of this psalm are perhaps not claiming that David is the author, but that it is written in the style of David?

In any case, it seems clear that the editors of the *Psalms*, probably working in Babylon in the 6th century BC, valued the superscriptions as a record of what was remembered about the provenance of each psalm. Note that this was a time of dramatic upheavals: much was being lost, and the regularisation of the canonical scriptures was, at least, a systematic

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and sustained effort of remembering. Memory is an essential faculty of the man or woman of faith,\(^7\) as the Psalmists well knew :-

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I call God to mind \(\text{zakar}\) and I moan} \\
\text{I speak and my spirit faints …} \\
\text{I call to mind \(\text{zakar}\) my songs in the night} \\
\text{To my own heart I speak, and my spirit inquires …} \\
\text{I call to mind \(\text{zakar}\) the acts of Yah} \\
\text{when I recall \(\text{zakar}\) thy wonders of old}
\end{align*}
\]

Ps.77:3,6,11 (transl. Robert Alter)

Remembrance is even used powerfully to characterise the final cosmic salvation of God :-

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{All the far ends of earth will remember} \\
\text{and return to the \text{LORD}} \\
\text{All the clans of the nations} \\
\text{will bow down before thee} \\
\text{For the \text{LORD}'s is the kingship} \\
\text{and he rules over the nations}
\end{align*}
\]

Ps.22:27f (transl. Robert Alter)

The superscriptions are definitely part of the text, but there is a little less certainty about them than there is about the text itself. That is, in the Ancient MSS there is more variation in the superscriptions than in the text of the psalms. But not much more.\(^9\) It seems that the superscriptions are largely ancient: they are almost entirely absent from Book V (probably containing the latest psalms), and the LXX translators (for whom the exile was a fairly recent memory) clearly didn't understand many of the technical terms, indicating their relative antiquity. Thus, the ancient editors of Psalms largely treated the superscriptions with the same scrupulousness that they treated the text itself. They are important: and that is why I treat them at length.

### 4.2 The authors

Almost half the psalms are explicitly named for David (73 out of 150, including Ps.145), and several of the others are closely related (Ps.96 for example quotes 1Chron.16 extensively, and other psalms in Book IV are also dependent on this passage).

11 of the psalms are named for an Asaph: Asaph was the Levite appointed by David apparently as his chief musician: see the passage immediately following David's thanksgiving psalm when the Ark entered Jerusalem (1Chron.16). See also 1Chron.25.1 and 2Chron.29:30 where Asaph is called the king's seer,\(^10\) and 2Chron.5:12 which emphasises that Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun were musicians. Note that David's musician was not the only Asaph: Nehemiah also names an Asaph as a director of music (Neh.12:46).

\[^7\]\text{zakar (remembrance, be mindful) is an important root word used hundreds of times, including dozens of times in Psalms. This is worth a major study in itself. Curiously, it also means "male", from the idea that men take precedence (one should be more mindful of them)! This also merits a major study. I guess that the Hebrew thought was in contradistinction to the dominant matriarchism of the surrounding cultures, including (earlier) the dark earth religion of the Hittites and (later) the fertility cults of the Canaanites and Babylonians. We forget this baleful dominance in ancient times; and usually fail, anachronistically, to give due weight to it. A clear case in point is Paul's strictures on women when writing to Timothy, which should be read in the context of the influence of the cult of Diana on the Ephesian church.}

\[^8\] This is a deliberate reference to Moses' (not Miriam's!) Song of the Sea (Ex.15:2) :- \text{Yah is my strength and my song / and he has become my salvation; a text also quoted \textit{verbatim} by the psalmist of Ps.118.}

\[^9\] Kirkpatrick (\textit{op.cit.}) goes into details.

\[^10\] \textit{seer}, that is, one who sees, or a prophet. To be precise, in 1Chron.25:1 "some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun were set apart for prophesying"
Clearly, Asaph was appointed by David, but equally clearly Ps.79 (by "Asaph": probably Ps.80 too) was written some 400 years later, after the fall of Jerusalem. Some (or many?) of the sons of Asaph doubtless bore his name. Nehemiah knew an (another?) Asaph ("keeper of the king's forest", Neh.2:8). Both Pss.79 and 80 try to praise God (Asaph's job!), despite their circumstances. But perhaps, as we have already noted for Ps.145, Robert Alter's emphasis that the superscription does not necessarily have to denote authorship should be remembered.

The sons of Korah are named for 11 psalms. Korah rebelled against Moses (Num.16), "but his line did not die out" (Num.26:11). The Korahites were gatekeepers (1Chron.9:19; 26:19), and it is very clear that "sons of Korah" refers to David's officials for many of these psalms. But Ps.85 must be late (see v.5: wilt thou be angry with us forever?). Kirkpatrick (op.cit.) makes the good point that "of the sons of Korah" may refer to the psalm having been taken from the collection of the sons of Korah. But note that this means (or may mean) that one or other of the "sons of Korah" was the author, which is what we understood at the outset.

Solomon is named for two psalms, one concluding Book II (the Coronation Psalm) and one in the collection of Songs of Ascents, to mark Solomon as the builder of the Temple.

Ps.90, opening Book IV, is by Moses, the only psalm predating David in the whole book. Kirkpatrick rules out early composition, but on wholly spurious grounds. A digression to explain this judgement will be valuable. Kirkpatrick claims that Moses could not have written vv.13-17 (Relent O LORD, how long...?)! One wonders how much imagination Kirkpatrick had, and how much he thought Moses might have had. He also asserts that although the language of Ps.90 is similar to that of Deuteronomy, the obvious conclusion that Deuteronomy is early should be turned on its head, since Deuteronomy is assumed (in scholarly opinion) to be late. To be clear, if Ps.90 is by Moses then Deuteronomy is early. On the other hand, if Deuteronomy is late then Ps.90 is not by Moses. I refrain from here further digressing on the date of the Deuteronomy, which I believe represents a very early text, however late its present form might be.

The last two named "authors" in the superscriptions are the "Ezrahites", Heman and Ethan (Pss.88, 89) which conclude Book III of Psalms. A Heman and an Ethan are mentioned in the lists of 1Chron.2:6 (cp. 1Kings 4:31) as "sons of Zerah in the tribe of Judah" and renowned sages (Heman was called "the king's seer" in 1Chron.25:1, 5), surpassed in wisdom only by Solomon. "Ezrahite" may be a familial designation derived

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Or a psalm may have been ascribed to Asaph as a way of emphasising its authority. This is a commonly expressed scholarly position, and it is certainly true that cognate literature abounds in instances where the author uses a pen name from antiquity to suggest authority. (The first century Wisdom of Solomon is a prominent example, although this is hardly cognate! But the Psalms of Solomon certainly predates 45BC and is possibly Maccabean, and is now known only in Greek translation, which to my mind guarantees pseudonymity.) But it seems to me that the Biblical editors cannot be proved to have done this, and certainly the witness of similar literature from the Christian era is that editors knew the practice, but for books to be thought of as canonical they insisted on verifying authorship. I am certain that this attitude to the text was exactly the same for the faithful Jewish editors of the canonical text working in Babylon. I will adduce evidence for this scrupulousness in the course of the discussion.

In particular the Song of Moses, Deut.32. Robert Alter denies this similarity ("tenuous, and very few, if they exist"). In my opinion, the Song of Moses is manifestly early. It should be commented, against Alter, that the phrase, "thou hadst formed..." in v.2 is literally "didst travail in birth with" (Alter renders this, "spawned", which sounds like an error to me) and quotes Deut.32:18 directly. Kirkpatrick comments that this metaphor so startled the LXX translators that they substituted the passive voice "were made".

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from "Zerah". But it cannot be intended to suggest these men of Solomon's court as authors of these psalms, since both psalms appear to be late, apparently referring to both Job (an Exilic book) and Lamentations. Perhaps for these two psalms the names in the superscriptions are not intended to specify the poets but to emphasise the wisdom of the poems? For both of these psalms are hard and we need assurance that they are really the word of God. Or perhaps they are (astonishingly) really early, perhaps dating from David's time in the wilderness, and the editors of Psalms are emphasising to their people that the terrible times they were in were also known to David? As the writer to the Hebrews says (2:18), "For in that he himself hath suffered … he is able to succour …".

Lastly, Jeduthun is named in three psalms, 39 and 62 ("of David") and 77 ("of Asaph"), not as an author but (presumably) associated with the music. We are told in the superscription to Ps.39 that Jeduthun was the "Chief Musician" in David's court (see 1Chron.16:41f; 25:1ff; 2Chron.5:12; 35:15) and "the King's [David's] seer" (2Chron.35:15). In any case, it seems that the text is making explicit that these three psalms were set to music. We have started to sing Ps.62 as a magnificent hymn (My soul finds rest in God alone) : here is a challenge to the musicians to set the other two as well!

### 4.3 Musical notations: the words

A series of strange and obscure words are a part of the text. It is important to point out that no-one can confidently say what some of these mean, even the LXX translators of the Hebrew into the Greek in the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC were not sure, and they were over 2000 years closer to the original than us! Still, even in the hard cases some helpful things can be said. In this treatment I largely follow Kirkpatrick (op.cit.).

**Psalms** (Mizmor) means a piece of music, or a song with an instrumental accompaniment. Occurs in over a third (57) of Psalms, and is usually connected with the name of David, who is called "the sweet singer of Israel" (2Sam.23:1). Note also that it was David who instituted the sophisticated liturgy that predated Solomon's Temple, note the post-Exilic references: "...the singers, the sons of Asaph" (Ezra 2:41; Neh.7:44).

**Song** (Shir) occurs 30 times, often accompanying mizmor. It is also the word used for Solomon's 1005 songs (1Kings 4:32). The Songs of Ascent are a specific collection of 15 psalms in Book V. **Song of Loves** (Ps.45): Kirkpatrick points out that the word for loves (yedidut) is from the same root as Solomon's original name Jedidiah (2Sam.12:25), and always used for high and noble affection, especially God's love for his people (Ps.60:5; Deut.33:12; Is.5:1). Hence "[royal] wedding song" (NIV).

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13 but dependency is always hard to prove, and in any case, even if two text are clearly dependent, which is dependent on which? Two clear examples of this problem are 2Peter (eg.2:17) with Jude (13) and Is.2 with Mic.4. Which text was first and which dependent?

14 These references are from Kirkpatrick (op.cit.), who also comments that Jeduthun appears to have been called "Ethan" (compare 1Chron.15:17,19 with 1Chron.16:41,42 and 25:1ff). The question of determining who is who from the lists in Chronicles is very intricate, since multiple names were used, with multiple renderings of names, and multiple approaches to genealogy. So Ethan (Jeduthun?) was son of Kushaiah in 1Chron.15:17, but son of Kishi in 1Chron.6:44. Shemaiyah is a "son" of Jeduthun in 2Chron.29:14, but a grandson in 1Chron.9:16. I think that partly the Chroniclers (probably working in Babylon, much later than the history they are describing) are representing the facts in a way which avoids redundancy (assuming a sophisticated background understanding), and partly they are scrupulously representing their ancient sources (which they may not entirely understand any more).

15 Pss.7, 18, 30, 46, 48, 65, 66, 67, 68, 75, 76, 83, 88, 92, 108, and the collection of the 15 "Songs of Ascent" (Pss.120-134)
**Maskil** is obscure. It occurs 13 times, mostly in Books II and III. It has to do with *instruction*: see the cognate verb in Ps.32:8 "I will instruct thee". Probably it means *a skilful psalm*, that is, a psalm with a "musical setting of a specially delicate and artistic character" (Kirkpatrick).

Literally it probably includes the meaning "*with understanding*": see Ps.47:7 in KJV and the epigraph of this book. But the epigraph also includes a translation by Robert Alter that looks entirely different (and this reading has the consensus of modern scholars – see NIV for example). Alter points out that Amos uses the same word (maskil, with a different prefix) at Amos 5:13:

> Therefore the prudent keep quiet [hamaskil] in such times. Amos 5:13

and infers that the word refers also to the vocalisation. The text is allusive and the interpretation challenges us! We wrestle with the Word of God as Jacob wrestled with the angel. And how much we are changed by the encounter measures our success in the struggle.

**Miktam** is also obscure, occurring 6 times and always associated with David. The LXX renders it στυλογραφία, *stylographia* (inscription, meaning in stone), and the Targum elaborates this as "*an excellent writing*". Hence KJV margin, "*a golden psalm* : with reference to the preciousness of its contents, like the *golden sayings of Pythagoras*" (Kirkpatrick). Robert Alter (op.cit.) points out in his commentary on Ps.56, that: "In later Hebrew it comes to mean *aphorism*, but that is scarcely its biblical sense".

**Shiggaion** occurs in Ps.7 (and in Habukkuk in a slightly different form), and is obscure. Robert Alter (op.cit.) says, "because the probable verbal root of this noun suggests emotional excess, it might mean something such as *rhapsody*".

**Higgaion** occurs with Selah (q.v.) in Ps.9:16, and at Ps.92:3 where Robert Alter renders it most helpfully as "*chanted* (on the lyre with chanted sound: in the KJV this is "solemn sound")". Closely cognate words are rendered "*meditation*" (Pss.5:1; 19:14; 49:3), "*musing" (39:3), and "*device" (Lam.3:62).

**Prayer** is used for five psalms as well as Hannah’s and Habukkuk's. Books I and II of Psalms are called "*the prayers of David*" (Ps.72:20).

**Petition** (Pss.38, 70). The KJV has "*to bring to remembrance*". Robert Alter has "*to call to mind*". Kirkpatrick urges the rendering "*to make memorial*", where *memorial* suggests the *Azkara*17, the incense of offering (this word is used in both 1Chron.16:4 and Is.66:3). Alter says that "the Hebrew infinitive *lehazkir* is anomalous" and suggests that "*it might have a connotation of confession: Compare the words of Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer (Gen.41:9), 'My offences I recall [mazkir] today’, and those of the widow from Tsorfath to Elijah (1Kings 17f), 'you have come to me to call to mind [lehazkir] my crime’".

**Thank-offering** (Ps.100) may also refer to a liturgical use (see Ps.56:12).

**Praise** (*Tehilah*) (Ps.145; see above)

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16 The Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. This substantial literature was developed from the return from Babylon (see Neh.8:8) right up to the Middle Ages.

17 Azkarah is a technical term for the Levitical offering of Lev.2:2; 24:7.
**Gittith** (Pss.8, 81, 84). This may refer to a musical instrument, which cannot now be identified with complete confidence. However, Kirkpatrick mentions two credible possibilities. *Gittith* is derived formally from *Gath* and may mean some Gittite instrument: so the Targum recalls "the harp which David brought from Gath". However, the LXX reads "for the wine presses" indicating that these psalms were sung at the Feast of Tabernacles at the end of the vintage; Ps.81 appears to have been especially intended for that festival (and in ancient Jewish usage was also for New Year's Day), and the other two also seem appropriate. In the Christian church Ps.8 is a Proper Psalm for Ascension Day.

**Sheminith** (Pss.6, 12) and **Alamoth** (Ps.46). I take these together since they are mentioned together at 1Chron.15:20f. They both appear to refer to musical instruments, and Robert Alter renders *sheminith* as "eight-stringed lute" following the reference to eight of the word and the witness of the LXX (ογδοοις, ogdoes or octave) and Jerome ("pro octavo"). Kirkpatrick suggests that *alamoth* means after the manner of maidens, or maidens' voices, that is, soprano. He notes that this directive may also have appeared as a subscript to Ps.48.

**Mahalath** (Pss.53, 88) is entirely obscure, but presumably refers to a musical instrument: LXX simply transliterates! Note that Ps.14, the parallel of Ps.53, does not have this superscription. Note also that Alter simply translates the *leannoth* in Ps.88 as "to sing out". I interpret this as having the same import as the rubric of the 1549 Prayer Book for the Lord's Prayer, which the minister was to read "with a loud voice". The people must know and understand this prayer in English! This rubric was an explicit discontinuity with the past, where mere possession of the Lord's Prayer in English was a capital offence. Ps.88 is a terrifying lament, ending in "my friend – utter darkness" (Alter), and the rubric is emphasising the legitimacy of this expression; it was recognising that these things happen and it was OK to say so …

**Sabbath Day** (Ps.92) is the only reference to the daily Psalms in the Hebrew text (Kirkpatrick). In the Second Temple liturgy, each day of the week had its special psalm, sung at the offering of the morning sacrifice (see the detailed account at Ecclesiasticus 50:14ff).

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18 reading GVTT for GYTT with a different vocalisation
19 Thus, LXX revocalises unto death of KJV Ps.48:14 to give alamoth. Kirkpatrick suggest that this may represent a displacement of the superscription of Ps.49. The Hebrew is ‘al-mut, which is obscure, and both Kirkpatrick and Robert Alter agree that it probably has the same sense as le’olam, forever. There are similar quibbles on the superscription of Ps.9
20 Kirkpatrick interprets mahalath leannoth of Ps.88 as the name of the melody meaning (possibly) "sickness to afflict", but comments that *leannoth* may also mean "for singing antiphonally".
21 Kirkpatrick goes on to point out that the LXX gives respectively Pss.24, 48, 94, 93, for the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 6th days of the week. The Old Latin Version (the Vetus Latina, i.e. predating Jerome; a product of the North African church which did not use Greek, and a translation of one or other versions of the LXX, probably from late 2nd century AD at the earliest) gives Ps.81 for the 5th day, and the Mishnah (Tamid 7:3) agrees with all these, also giving Ps.82 for the 3rd day. The Mishnah now refers to the Rabbis’ codification of the Jewish oral Law which was made after the fall of Jerusalem in 135 AD.
22 *Ecclesiasticus* is an Apocryphal book. But note that LXX included the Apocrypha, as did both Geneva (1560) and KJV (1611). The Apocrypha is important historically even though everyone agrees that it is not canonical.
4.4 Musical notations: the Selah

Every reader of Psalms very quickly notices the curious inclusion of this mysterious little word. It is found 71 times in 39 psalms, 3 times in Habukkuk and nowhere else in the Old Testament. It is found in the 3rd and 18th of the Eighteen Benedictions of the Jewish liturgy, and also in two of the (Greek) Psalms of Solomon. Otherwise it is unknown.

The LXX invariably renders it διαψαλμα, diapsalma, probably meaning an instrumental interlude (compare διαωλον, diaulion, an interlude on a flute). On the other hand, the oldest Jewish traditions, including the Targum and the 2nd century AD Aquila of Sinope (whom Jerome calls "the most careful interpreter of the meaning of Hebrew words") interpret the word to mean for ever. Jerome comments in a letter to Marcella that the word is designed "to connect what precedes with what follows, or to shew that what has been said is everlasting", and compares the use of the word with that of Amen (so be it) or Shalom (peace) to mark the end of a passage and confirm its contents.

Selah probably is derived from a root meaning to raise, and signifies "Up!" Considering that it is almost invariably associated with titles indicating that the psalm was set to music, it can then be considered as a direction to the musicians to strike up, either with a louder accompaniment or with a musical interlude while the singing ceases. But the Oxford Hebrew Lexicon explains Selah to be a liturgical direction to the congregation, meaning Lift up your voices in the benediction, Blessed be YHWH for ever and ever (see Neh.9:5), and note the forever as the last word of the benediction. It is worth emphasising this benediction from Nehemiah. The rest of Neh.9 is the long prayer, which is not a psalm because it is not in verse, but which looks very like a psalm to me. But the opening verse, Blessed are you, YHWH our God / and blessed be your glorious name, surpassing all blessing and praise, to me sounds very Jewish. It sounds different from the psalms in the Book of Psalms, which never uses such phrases. Compare the Kaddish for the dead:

Magnified and sanctified may His great Name be
In the world that He created as He wills
And may His kingdom come in your lives and in your days
And in the lives of all the house of Israel
Swiftly and soon
And say all AMEN!
AMEN!
May His great Name be blessed
Always and forever …

Leon Wieseltier, Kaddish (1998)

My current practise when reading the Psalms aloud is to repeat some or all of the verse preceding the Selah. This is to somehow mark its presence, and invariably seems to be appropriate and helpful. I hope that in time the musicians and poets (lyrics writers) will be stimulated to make a more creative use of the Selah.

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23 In this section I almost entirely follow Kirkpatrick, who is very informative.
24 Pss. 3, 4, 7, 9, 20, 21, 24, 32, 39, 52, 54, 55, 57, 59, 60, 61, 62, 68, 140, 143 (of David), 44, 46, 47, 48, 49, 84, 85, 87, 88 (of the sons of Korah), 89 (of Ethan the Ezrahite), 50, 75, 76, 77, 81, 82, 83 (of Asaph), 66, 67 ("a song, a psalm").
25 Note that the LXX does not always agree with the Hebrew text on where the Selahs are. This indicates some uncertainty in their placing. I note this to encourage modern musicians to allow themselves a little bit of freedom in interpretation.
26 This is Kirkpatrick's citation, referring to an edition before 1902
27 I copied this from Leon Wieseltier, Kaddish (1998: Alfred A. Knopf, New York). This is an extraordinary, and extraordinarily moving, meditation on the death of his father.
4.5 Musical notations: the tunes

**Upon Muth-labben** (Ps.9). Robert Alter reads this "almut laben", and Jerusalem Bible translates, curiously and without comment, "on oboe and harp". Kirkpatrick and Alter agree that laben (probably) means "to the son"; Alter suggests that a possible reading has the consonants reversed, hence nebel, harp, and the JB reading. Kirkpatrick (citing a reading of LXX) also suggests that the initial almut may be a corruption of alamoeth (q.v. above). However, the title appears to read "to the death of the son" (NIV), a reading supported by the Targum, which paraphrases, "concerning the death of the man who went forth between the camps" (referring to Goliath, since the Hebrew word for "champion" in 1Sam.7:4 is "man of space between the camps").

**Upon Ay ye leth hash-Shahar** (Ps.22). Alter says baldly, "the name elsewhere means morning star, or literally, dawn doe" (so JB). Hence NIV "doe of the morning". Kirkpatrick agrees ("hind of the morning"), but points out "that LXX renders, concerning the help that cometh in the morning, explaining ayyeleth by the similar word eyaluth (strength or succour) in v.19".

**Shoshannim** (i.e. lilies, Pss.45, 60, 69, 80). The name of the tune. Ps.60 has shushan-eduth, lily of the covenant or testimony; Ps.80 has shoshannim-eduth, which Kirkpatrick suggests is the first line of a song in praise of the Law: "[like] the lily of the testimony …", that is, "just as the Law is pure and beautiful …".

**Jonath elem rehokim** (Ps.56). Robert Alter says of this title, "This is one of the most mysterious of the musical terms in Psalms. The literal sense of the three Hebrew words is haunting: the mute dove of distant places. The great mediaeval poet Judah Halevi responded to the evocativeness of the phrase in his poetry by turning it into a concrete image of Israel's exile." Halevi followed ancient interpretations, the LXX paraphrases, "for the people removed far from the sanctuary", and the Targum comments, "Concerning the congregation of Israel, which is compared to a silent dove at the time when they were far from their cities, and turned again and praised the Lord of the World". NIV gives, "a dove on distant oaks", revocalising elem to elim.

**al-tashchet** ("do not destroy"; Pss.57,58,59,75). Kirkpatrick says of the song which gave this title, that "a trace is still preserved in Is.65:8: 'When the new wine is found in the cluster', the prophet says, 'men say Destroy it not, for a blessing is in it.' These words in the Hebrew have a distinct lyric rhythm. They are the first line of one of the vintage songs so often alluded to in Scripture. And so we learn that the early religious melody of Israel had a popular origin, and was closely connected with the old joyous life of the nation." Robert Alter is also interesting: "The mediaeval Hebrew commentator David Kimchi ingeniously links it [the title] to David's rebuke to his men when they came upon Saul sleeping in their cave, 'al-tashhiheitu: do him no violence [1Sam:24:6]'".

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28 which Kirkpatrick casually dismisses, saying that this figurative interpretation is now "generally abandoned". Readers should be warned that they need to be very careful to distinguish well-founded history, or a well-founded historical interpretation, from unfounded opinions. More than in most other subjects, Biblical studies are affected by fashion! Our refrain needs always to be, how do you know?

29 He is citing Robertson Smith, *Old Testament in the Jewish Church* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1881). The second edition (London: 1892) is available on Wikisources. Robertson Smith himself has a substantial article in Wikipedia.

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4.6 Structure of the book of Psalms

There is no manuscript evidence of any sort that the Book of Psalms ever had anything but five books. This is always interpreted as mirroring the five books of the Pentateuch, that is, Psalms is explicitly structured as a second Pentateuch. This emphasises the importance of Psalms to the editors who put the Book together. How did they do it?

There are three "David" collections of psalms: the first and longest in Book I (37 psalms: that is, all the Book except Pss.1, 2, 10, 33), the second in Book II (17 psalms concluding the book in a collection split only by Pss.66, 67) and the third in Book V (the eight psalms from Ps.138 to Ps.145). There is a collection of 7 psalms of the "Sons of Korah" opening Book II and a collection of 11 "Asaph" psalms opening Book III. And there is a collection of 15 "Songs of Ascent" following Ps.119 in Book V. Book IV opens with the only Moses psalm in the book and continues with a (mostly unsigned) collection of psalms which expand on David’s song of praise in 1Chron.16.

Each Book concludes with a doxology. The doxology ending Book I (Ps.41:13) is not a part of Ps.41, which properly ends at v.12, but is an extra verse concluding the Book, which cites the wording David himself used (1Kings 1:48, reported to Abijah when David on his deathbed made Solomon King; 1Chron.29:10, David’s final song of praise), the wording Solomon used when bringing the Ark into the Temple (1Kings 8:15); by Ezra in response to Artaxerxes’ command (Ezra 7:27) and by the "Levites" bidding the people to praise the LORD three weeks after the first Feast of Tabernacles after the return from Exile, at the opening of the long prayer that would be a psalm if it were in verse (Neh.9:5). It is also used by Zechariah (Lk.1:68).

Similarly, the doxology concluding Book II (Ps.72:18-20) is no part of Solomon’s psalm which ends at v.17. This doxology also quotes David’s final song of praise both in the opening phrase and in the reference to God’s "glorious name" (1Chron.29:10,13), which latter is also echoed in Nehemiah (9:5), and by Isaiah (63:14) in the middle of the great Trinitarian hymn of praise and supplication. See the section above for commentary on the "wondrous works" of God, the perception of which is always central to doxology. And God himself originally asserted that His glory filled the whole earth (Num.14:21).

The brief doxology ending Book III takes words from the start, the middle and the end of the one ending Book II, and the one ending Book IV echoes the doxology of Book I. Books I, II, III use a double Amen in the doxologies, but Book IV echoes 1Chron.16:36, David’s psalm of thanks that the whole Book IV (and especially P.96) expands on. See also Nehemiah (5:13; 8:6) where this part of the doxology is repeated, and note that this usage modifies the usage in the Torah where the Amen appears only in a judicial context (the test for the unfaithful wife, Num.5:22; and the responses of the congregation at Mount Ebal, Deut.27).

The doxology of Book V is different and elaborate. The Book concludes with the collection of eight David psalms, the last of which is simply entitled "Praise" and introduces the five following "Hallelujah" psalms that conclude Book V and the whole book of Psalms. It is interesting that the last three psalms are each essentially paens of praise, but nevertheless carefully differentiated. Where Ps.148 is about Creation (like Ps.8), Ps.149 is about God putting right what has gone wrong with Creation (like Ps.2). The kings that challenge the King will be fettered or broken with iron (Ps.149:8; Ps.2:9). But Ps.150 only bids every creature with “breath” to praise the LORD. As God breathes into us his Spirit (Gen.2:7; Is.42:5; Ez.37:6; John 20:22) so should we breathe out praises to him.
The Prologue to Psalms; Pss.1, 2: the two psalms that introduce the first David collection, were also added by the editors. Both Pss.1 & 2 are unsigned, which suggests that they are both late. I think Ps.1 is certainly late, it quotes Jer.19:5-8 (also quoted by Ez.47:12). Ps.2, like Ps.45, may refer to Solomon and therefore be early and a very fitting introduction to the first David collection. But perhaps it refers to Hezekiah: on v.2 ("kings of the earth") cp. Is.24:21, and see the similar wording to v.3 ("cords" … "yoke") in Hos.11:4 and Nah.1:13 ("bands" are the fastenings of the yoke, see Lev.26:13; Jer.27:2). On "yoke" see the incident in Jeremiah 28, where Jeremiah's image of bearing the yoke (ch.27) is contradicted by the false prophet Hananiah; perhaps both of these were looking back to Ps.2? Jesus' saying (Matt.11:29f) certainly looked back to Jeremiah's image.

4.7 Editors and dating of Psalms

It is clear that Psalms is a large and complex book. Some psalms are nominally very early (e.g. Ps.90 of Moses) and some are unquestionably late (Ps.137, By the waters of Babylon …). I have shown that there is no good reason to doubt the ascription of Ps.90 to Moses, which means that Psalms contains individual poems composed over an entire millennium. However, the form in which we have the book is fixed. There is no manuscript evidence for anything but 150 psalms arranged as we have it in five books. Therefore we know that there was a serious editorial effort in or shortly after the Babylonian exile which commanded essentially the complete consensus of the Jewish scholars. Who were these men, and how did they handle their sources?

It seems to me that Ezra and Nehemiah must have been involved. They lived at the right time and they commanded canonical authority. How could there have been consensus without their involvement? But then, why did they not sign their work?

I think that this question points us to the central question of the attitude of the editors. It has been fashionable for modern scholars to assume that the ancient editors treated their texts as malleable. In modern scholarship one will regularly find the assumption that the ancient editors stitched old poems together for new purposes, and modified old poems to suit their theology. One reason I like Robert Alter's Book of Psalms is that he

30 There are some very minor scholarly quibbles with this statement, but it is an astonishing fact that it is nevertheless almost entirely true. Note that although the LXX joins Pss.9&10 and Pss.114&115 it separates Pss.116 and 147 into two, maintaining the number of 150 psalms. Jerome in the 4th century translated the whole Bible into Latin initially from the LXX (this is known as the Vulgate, where Latin is the "vulgar" language, the language of the people), and hence the Vulgate (the "Catholic Bible") has a different numbering of Psalms from the Bibles of Luther, Calvin and Coverdale who used the Masoretic (Hebrew) text. Jerome only subsequently realised that the Hebrew text was significantly different, and in a second edition of the Vulgate translated directly from the Hebrew text, a move which was very unpopular in places. But he didn't dare to renumber the Psalms according to the Hebrew numbering. The Vulgate is a first class translation; it is not Jerome's fault that the Romans subsequently idolised it.

31 For example, the 'J' (Jahwist) and "E" (Elohist) schools said to underlie the differences between Pss.14 & 53. The ancient editors (probably) had J and E versions, since they were transmitted in different collections, so in this case the editors are not thought to have modified their texts, but the principle is the same: the text is thought to be subject to the opinions of the communities that remembered them. Rather, in my opinion, we should imagine that David had different versions of the same song for different purposes, differences which are documented in the superscriptions. In the same way, the synoptic Gospels are thought to have a literary dependence on each other even though this alleged dependence cannot be substantiated in detail. (For example, Q is now supposed to partially underlie Mark too!) A much simpler hypothesis is that Jesus repeated his sayings many times in slightly different ways, so that there is actually no literary dependence of the Gospels on each other, or on any alleged Q. They are literarily independent, but all dependent on the primary source, Jesus himself. (KISS – "keep it simple, stupid")
emphatically rejects this attitude, in favour of the assumptions of textual integrity and textual coherence, and therefore, by extension, the scrupulousness of the ancient editors.

The editors of *Psalms* took the attitude that they were only transmitting their sources. It is true that they were selecting and ordering them too, but this was considered of lesser importance. They gathered together all the various collections of psalms they could find, and, scrupulously maintaining their texts, copied them together into the single text we have today. I believe that they added the doxologies which marked the ends of the five books of psalms, including the pair of Psalms (149, 150) that conclude the collection, and they added two (possibly new) Psalms as a Prologue to the whole work (1, 2).

Their scrupulousness is exemplified by the way repetition is treated. Pss.14 & 53 (respectively in Books I & II) are almost identical, and Pss.60 & 108 (Books II & V) have the large central portion in common. Ps.18 is an almost exact repetition of 2Sam.22 and parts of Ps.96 are an almost exact repetition of some of David's psalm in 1Chron.16. But I emphasise here that "almost identical" is not the same as "identical". The editors were certainly aware of the changes in wording between their sources, but carefully maintained the differences, taking the attitude that for them to "harmonise" their sources would be adding their own interpretative opinions to their texts. This is why, although compilation of the book in the form we have it was relatively late (550-440 BC say), the individual psalms were composed some half a millennium (David) or a millennium (Moses) earlier.

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32 and on this, see more extensively below, §6.4
5 Language and literary form

If nothing else, Psalms is great literature. Everyone, whatever their philosophical standpoint, should be able to agree about that. In this section we consider a handful of literary themes that seem important to me.

Of first importance is the impact of the Septuagint (known as the "LXX"), the ancient translation from the Hebrew to the Greek by the Alexandrian Jews that was complete by the second century BC (see §5.1). The existence of the Greek text dominated the subsequent use of the book for the next six centuries; the fact of the existence of this translation strongly limits the dating of the book; and we even know the book by the Greek name, not the Hebrew one! For the Hebrew text itself, we are indebted to the Masoretic scholars who worked in the centuries following the final destruction of Jerusalem in AD137 (§5.2).

The book is commonly referred to as the "Psalms of David", and David was acknowledged as "the sweet singer of Israel" (2Sam.23:1). But Peter called David a "prophet" at the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:30), and the Christians regularly cited the psalms as prophetic. The question of whether they can be understood in this way is interesting and very informative, and changes the literary light in which they should be viewed (§5.3).

The whole question of dating the psalms is fraught with difficulty and there is no consensus among scholars. Some people think that this question is irrelevant since the poetry is "timeless", but this seems to me to be an error since a) no literature is timeless - it is always located in an historical context which invariably sheds light on it, and b) both Christian and Jewish literature is always very sensitive to time, since the timing of God is central to the stories that both the Jews and the Christians tell. History is central for both Jews and Christians! Of course the psalms, both the individual poems and the books, should be dated, if possible (§5.4).

The dating of the acrostic (that is, alphabetical) psalms is interesting because a script presupposes an alphabet, and if a poem uses the alphabet explicitly it means that the poet wrote it, he didn't only compose it. For example, Homer composed his poems, probably in the eighth century BC; they were only written down later. Again, Isaiah had a characteristic name of God: "The Holy One of Israel", which is used by several psalms: I propose this literary feature as one way of dating these psalms (§5.5).

The "Verses of Cursing" is a subject that modern man finds very difficult to square with literary quality. I try to show (§5.6) how there should be considered no such difficulty when the poems are approached correctly. This is an issue that allows us to see deeply into this literature.

This book is not theological, so that we are not really concerned to explore the Names of God. However, there is one Name ("Yah") that is characteristic of the Psalms, and it is important to explore it thoroughly (§5.7).

5.1 The importance of the Septuagint (LXX)

The canonical books of the Old Testament were divided into the Law, the Prophets and the Writings from very ancient times. When Jesus pointed to this three-fold division (Lk.24:44) he represented the Writings by "Psalms". The ancient order of the books put Psalms first in the Writings. (The order we have follows the LXX in placing Job before Psalms.) In Hebrew the book is called "Praises" (tehilim); our title of "Psalms" is a Greek word that comes from the title of the book in the LXX – that is, it predates the Christian era.
It is worth here emphasising again the importance to the early Christians of the LXX, the "Septuagint", the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek by Jewish scholars in Alexandria around the 2nd century BC. The detailed story is rather complicated and does not here concern us. What is important is that early Christianity very rapidly spread to the Gentiles, whose common language was Greek. We have very detailed early evidence from Paul of the central importance of the Hebrew Scriptures in explaining the Resurrection to his hearers, and this would not have been possible had they not had the LXX, the Scriptures in Greek. When it says in Acts (17:11f) that the "noble" Bereans "searched the Scriptures daily" to see whether what Paul said was true, the context of the passage makes it pretty clear that it was the Scriptures in Greek, the LXX, that they searched. In any case, there are a number of places in the New Testament where the writers quote the LXX version of the Old Testament scriptures (where the Greek and Hebrew readings differ), proving that they were using the LXX. In particular, our very title, Psalms, comes not from the Hebrew but from the Greek text, the LXX.

We should also note that the Greek Orthodox Church continues to use the LXX in the liturgy, so that this Greek text has been in continuous use by the people of God for twenty two centuries!

5.2 The Masoretic Text

The Hebrew text itself is extraordinarily well-established. Near Jerusalem is the Shrine of the Book, a wing of the Israel Museum, containing the great Isaiah scroll recovered from the Qumran caves (the famous Dead Sea Scrolls) in 1947 and dating from at least the third century BC and possibly the fourth. This predates by well over a thousand years the Hebrew texts used by the Geneva scholars (the main source for the King James Bible of 1611), and yet the textual differences are insignificant! This means that the copying methods of the scribes were very highly accurate – astonishingly so! Readers of the Christian Gospels are used to the "scribes and Pharisees" to be roundly abused in general, but should remember that it was these very scribes who have nurtured not only our texts but also the detailed methods for accurately reproducing these same texts. This was a huge work of both love and faith for which we owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

It is baffling to most modern people to learn that this Hebrew text is a consonantal text: the vowels (the so-called vocalisation) are supplied by the oral tradition. Everything about the scrolls except the written text (the consonants) is referred to as the "masorah", and hence, the Masoretic Text.

It is essential to emphasise to English speakers that for the Hebrews, the "Word of God" is exactly that: the oral transmission of the actual words represented by the written consonantal text. "Word of God" for Hebrew speakers really is an aural experience, not a visual one! This is why we refer to the "vocalisation" of the consonantal text. The text itself is a mnemonic for the words that the text represents. Curiously, in Israel today it is the pure consonantal text that is used for (almost) everything – books, newspapers, signs etc.

The Masoretic scholars in the centuries after the final destruction of Jerusalem in 137 AD devised a method of writing down the vocalisation, and the "Masoretic Text" everyone

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1 The readings of the LXX which vary from the Hebrew (Masoretic) text therefore have canonical authority, a consideration that seems to be overlooked in modern debates about the so-called Textus Receptus.
refers to is now a text in the way we understand it, a text which specifies the words signified, not a text which merely uses mnemonic means to indicate the words specified. The earliest such text of the complete Hebrew Bible was a codex (a book, not a scroll) composed by Samuel ben Jacob in Egypt in 1010 AD, and is the oldest known complete Hebrew Bible, discovered in 1840 and now kept in St. Petersburg (and known as the Leningrad Codex).

Of course, the ancient scripts were not only consonantal, there was neither any punctuation nor even spaces between the words! And yet there remains very nearly 100% agreement on what the text says, with disagreements limited almost entirely to what most people would think of as trivia. The reason for this is the extraordinary care taken by the Jewish scholars to remember the text, and to maintain a record of the chain of evidence.

Indeed, the Jewish Publication Society edition of the Tanakh (the Hebrew Scriptures) opens the Preface to the 1999 edition with the statement:

A court of law relies on witnesses to establish the facts of a case.

which is surprising because it is an unusually clear claim of the standard of evidence required by the editors to establish the text. It is followed by a detailed description of how we can be sure that the text they present is reliable. Being editors, they emphasise the difficulties, errors, ambiguities and other textual problems they faced in preparing the published text. Nevertheless, they include this remarkable statement:

Amazingly, manuscript differences are truly minor.

The text published by JPS is based on the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) which is publicly available electronically. Although the BHS has had armies of scholarly editors labouring for years, amazingly the text is almost identical to the Leningrad Codex, which is the text prepared by Samuel ben Jacob a thousand years ago. Our Biblical text really is reliable!

5.3 Prophecy

The psalms are closely associated with "prophesying" – Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun were known as "the king's seers" (respectively 1Chron.25:5; 2Chron.29:30; 35:15), as were their sons (1Chron.25:1,2,3). 1Chron.25:1,2,3 says explicitly that "they [Asaph and Jeduthun with some of their sons] were set apart for the ministry of prophesying”. The first psalm was by Miriam "the prophetess". Moses himself was also called a prophet (Deut.34:10). Saul (and Samuel) were associated with fervent prophesy (see 1Sam.10:10ff; 19:20ff), which was the context for the young psalmist David.

The Hebrew Scriptures never say that David "prophesied" (that is left to Peter at the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2:30), but I think that David created a new poetical way of responding to God in the psalms that previously was not formalised the same way, was much more impulsive, impassioned and spontaneous, and was known as "prophesying". "Prophecy" is primarily "bringing the word of the LORD" and only secondarily "telling the future". The psalms, in giving us a way to respond to the Lord, also gives us another way of listening to Him, and are therefore akin to prophesy.
5.4 The acrostic psalms

Interestingly, the poems, as well as channelling the emotion of the poets, can also be very intellectual. The *acrostic*, or alphabetical, form is where succeeding verses start with the next letter of the Hebrew "alphabet". *Alphabet* is itself a word that comes from the Greek: "alpha, beta, gamma, delta" are the first four letters of the Greek alphabet, and the first four of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet are "aleph, beth, gimel, daleth". The acrostic form is important, not least because it helps to date Hebrew writing.

David apparently invented the acrostic form of Ps.34 as a response to an excess of emotion: "when he feigned madness before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he left". I think what is happening here is that David "feigned madness" very effectively (it worked!) but there was no acting tradition then and perhaps he was shocked at how effective it really was. Perhaps he nearly convinced himself that he was really mad, and needed to "come back to himself"? What better way than to say the alphabet? Terry Waite reported that when he was a hostage in Beirut he recited the times tables and did sums in the interminable intervals of solitary confinement, just to hang on to his sanity. And I think that Abiathar the priest, who fled Saul's revenge (1Sam.22:22f), was teaching David to read. What did they do in the long nights in the hills?

Anyway, wherever they came from (and judging by the superscriptions, Ps.34 was the first), the acrostic psalms all can be interpreted as having to do with the rationality of God. The Biblical acrostic poems are, Pss.9&10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; Lamentations chs.1-4 and Proverbs 31:10-31. We consider the acrostics in Proverbs and Lamentations since these will help us to read the acrostic psalms correctly.

The *Noble Wife* acrostic poem is very remarkable for its content, its style and its position. It has pride of place at the end of the book, the "last words".² *Proverbs* is ostensibly by Solomon, a claim made by the text that has not convincingly been refuted. There is a consensus that it is related in style and content to the Egyptian wisdom book, the *Instructions of Amenemopet*, probably composed in the 11th or 12th centuries, that is, not much before the reign of Solomon himself. The last section of the book is titled: *The sayings of King Lemuel;* "Lemuel" (unknown as a king, but meaning "consecrated to God") in Jewish tradition is a symbolic name for Solomon. It is intriguing to think that perhaps Solomon's mother (Bathsheba) composed the *Noble Wife*.

The *Noble Wife* is a paragon not only of virtue but of energy, leadership, and ability. She is emphatically not passive! This is remarkable in the context of Israel's patriarchal society: the women were excluded from the priesthood, but occasionally they were emphatically acknowledged in many other, often surprising, ways. Judah acknowledges Tamar as "more righteous" than he (Gen.38:26), Reuben lost his birthright over Bilhah (Gen.35:22; 49:3-4), Simeon and Levi lost their birthrights over the matter of Dinah (Gen.34; 49:5-7), Moses makes a special ruling in the case of the inheritance of Zelophehad's daughters (Num.36), the actions of Jephthah's daughter were commemorated annually (Judges 11) and the feast of Purim commemorating Esther's action is still kept (Esther 9:28). Deborah was Israel's judge, and David quotes her song of triumph over Barak (Judges 5) in Ps.68. We have noted already that Miriam "the prophetess" was the first Biblical psalmist (Ex.15:21) and in fact, prior to David, of the four biblical psalmists we know, three are women (the other is Hannah, 1Sam.2). Rahab shows conspicuous courage in helping the spies (Jos.2). Abigail shows conspicuous intelligence turning aside David's anger over the matter of Nabal the fool (1Sam.25), Jezebel is conspicuously

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² For "last words" see 2Sam.23:1; 1Chron.23:27 and cp. Gen.49:33; Deut.32:45.
wicked (2Kings 9:33), the prophet's widow was conspicuously pressing (2Kings 4:1-7), the great lady of Shunem was conspicuously hospitable (2Kings 4:8ff), Naaman's wife's little maid was conspicuously faithful (2Kings 5:3) and the Queen of Sheba was conspicuously wise (1Kings 10:9; 2Chron.9:8). The Noble Wife is a woman in the mould of these heroes. The fact that the Noble Wife poem is an acrostic emphasises that this is the way things should be: this is an intrinsic part of the rationality of God.

The Lamentations of Jeremiah over the destruction of Jerusalem in 596BC are a different case. The poems are heart-rending cries of grief, but they are not unhinged: the first four of them have a sophisticated acrostic structure. Jeremiah is telling us that, be our grief never so great, there still is the underlying security of the everlasting arms (Deut.33:27; Jer.31:3) of our gracious God, who is the one who does marvellously (see above on impossibility, and Hab.1:5). Indeed, this is why Jeremiah himself bought the potter's field (Jer.32, and note vv.17,27 as mentioned above). The wisdom of God looks to man like foolishness (1Cor.1:25), and Jeremiah is telling us that God's footprints are still in the most awful of circumstances, even if they "were not seen" (Ps.77:19). But the fifth poem of the Lamentations, although it maintains the acrostic-like structure of 22 verses, is no longer an acrostic. Jeremiah's grief is so great that perhaps he is indeed becoming unhinged, now only able to hang onto the semblance of rationality, like Job "by the skin of his teeth" (19:20).

The acrostic psalms Pss.25, 34, 37 are similar in form and content to Proverbs; one could perhaps characterise them respectively as prayer, thanksgiving and instruction. It used to be thought that Proverbs was late, and that consequently these psalms were late too; in fact no convincing evidence has been adduced for denying that Solomon was indeed the author of Proverbs, so that it remains credible (as the superscriptions appear to assert) that David also composed these psalms. The tone of these psalms is very calm, nevertheless none of them (in my opinion) are "formulaic", as some commentators say. Turn to me, David cries: be gracious to me for I am lonely and afflicted (Ps.25:16). Taste and see that the LORD is good! (Ps.34:8). And Jesus himself refers to David's The just shall inherit the earth (Ps.37:29) when he says The meek shall inherit the earth (Matt.5:5) since those who enter the Kingdom of heaven are precisely the justified ones, as David also said: The meek will he guide in judgement (Ps.25:9); moreover, although in Jesus' time meekness was rather out of fashion, nevertheless Moses was called "very meek" (Num.12:3).

As acrostics, Pss.25, 34, 37 are not quite regular, in both Pss.25, 34 the 6th letter waw is omitted and the final (supernumary) verse begins in both poems with the word for "ransom" (padah), starting with pe, the 17th letter in the Hebrew alphabet. In the Hebrew text of Ps.37, the 16th letter ayin is apparently missing. But Pss.9&10 (one psalm in the LXX) also appears to be a rather imperfect acrostic with seven letters missing. Ps.145

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3 "Meek" renders the Greek πραυσ (praus) uniformly in all these references (taking the LXX translation of the Hebrew).

4 When taken with the LXX text this is generally interpreted as evidence of textual corruption. Kirkpatrick makes a detailed textual argument that a word is missing and that v.28b should read: The unrighteous are destroyed forever (instead of They [the saints of v.28a] are preserved forever). This becomes intelligible when one realises that the consonantal text for the word for destroyed and preserved is the same – only the vocalisation differs.

5 Robert Alter considers that the text of this psalm has been substantially corrupted, referring to "quite a few phrases or lines" being "mangled". His reasoning does not appear to be sound. These psalms are a very interesting puzzle for the commentators since they are complicated textually, with the JPS edition marking six verses of the combined psalm: "Meaning of Hebrew uncertain", the difference between the various ancient versions, and the broken acrostic itself. Added to this is the apparently sharp difference in tone and substance between Ps.9 and Ps.10.
(discussed in §4.1) is also an imperfect acrostic, with nun (the 14th letter) missing. But again there is manuscript evidence that originally there was an extra verse at v.13b.6

Psalms 111 & 112 each have 22 lines and are regular acrostics; Ps.119 is also a regular acrostic but has 22 stanzas of 8 verses each. The ancient versions associated particularly Ps.111 with Haggai and Zechariah, and the other two are also clearly post-Exilic. It is interesting that these acrostic psalms can be split into two groups, early and late, from internal evidence, including content, language, and superscriptions; this split is confirmed if we consider the imperfect acrostic as indicating either an imperfect technique or textual corruption, both of which suggesting an earlier period of composition. David may not have felt the need to be entirely regular where I am sure the later poets would. An analogy could be to spelling; today we consider correct spelling to be a mark of education but the 16th century Tyndale was cavalier about it (see the verbatim quotes from his 1526 New Testament in §9.5).

5.5 The "Holy One of Israel"

Of the many stylistic features of the language of the Psalms, I want to here highlight only one, the use of Holy One of Israel as a title of God. This title is characteristic of Isaiah, who uses it 26 times (including 2Kings19:22)7. Outside Isaiah it is only used by the later Jeremiah (50:29; 51:5)8. So its use in three of the Psalms (71:22; 78:41; 89:18) is interesting and seems to point to an Isaianic date (eighth century BC) for them.9

Ps.71 should be read together with Hezekiah's psalm of thanks when he was healed (Is.38:10-20): perhaps Hezekiah himself composed it? Ps.78 does also seem to be contemporary with Hezekiah: see below (§6.6) for further commentary on it.

The use of the appellation "David my servant" in Ps.89 (vv. 3, 20, and cf. 39) also points to Hezekiah's time (see 2Kings 19:34 and the parallel Is.37:35). Jeremiah is clearly quoting this prophesy of Isaiah when he uses the same phrase three times in the crucially important Davidic chapter 33, see vv. 21, 22, 26. Could Ethan the Ezrahite have been commenting on Sennacharib's campaign10 (compare 2Chron.32:14 with Ps.89:51)? However, I think that Ps.89 must be referring to the later overthrow of Jerusalem by Babylon.

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6 So NIV simply inserts: The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises / and faithful in all he does, at v.13b, and Kirkpatrick affirms that this is proper, saying that there was no need for the LXX to supply this verse if it was really omitted in their originals. But Robert Alter and JPS simply ignore the LXX reading.

7 "Holy One of Israel" is used 25 times in Isaiah (1:4; 5:19,24; 10:20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19; 30:11,12,15; 31:1; 37:23; 41:14,16,20; 43:3,14; 45:11; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5; 55:5; 60:9,14; and in the parallel passage in 2Kings 19:22) and twice in Jeremiah (50:29; 51:5). The only other occurrences are in Psalms (71:22; 78:41; 89:18).

8 See also Ez.39:7; Hos.11:9; Hab.1:12

9 I am indebted for this point to Alec Motyer's The Prophecy of Isaiah (1993). Motyer considers that this reasoning for the dating of Pss.71, 78, 89 as post-Isaiah is "sound", although he adds that "it falls short of the point where we can affirm beyond a shadow of a doubt that The Holy One of Israel is Isaianic coinage – although, of course, nothing seems more likely or better fits the facts as we have them" (private communication 29th Jan, 2001).

10 Kirkpatrick takes these references to "David my servant" in the reverse order, considering them characteristic of Jeremiah, but it seems clear to me that Jeremiah looks back to Isaiah. Kirkpatrick also points out the link between Ps.89:39 and Lam.5:16 ("the crown has fallen from our head": also see Jer.13:16 and Job:19:9), but in view of Jeremiah explicitly answering the Psalmist ("you have rejected, you have spurned, you have been very angry with your anointed one", Ps.89:38) when he prophesies, "David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne . . ." (Jer.33:17) it seems that the psalmist is prior to the prophecy.
You have renounced the covenant with your servant
   And have defiled his crown in the dust
You have broken through all his walls …
   All who pass by have plundered him …
You have … cast his throne to the ground …
   You have covered him with a mantle of shame  Selah

Ps.89:39ff, 44f.

The psalm sounds more like Jeremiah than Isaiah. "David" is a synecdoche for Judah (not the Northern kingdom!), and the Selah in v.45 (and vv.4, 37, 48) is a deliberate Davidic archaism: we have seen that Jeremiah looks back to David. Most telling, the repeated lament for the covenant ("[you have] ... defiled his crown in the dust ... and cast his throne to the ground") seems to me to be quoting the Lamentations (5:16, "the crown has fallen from our heads"); and cf. Jer.13:18; Job 19:9). Ezekiel also used a similar metaphor, of a branch, in a comparable way: the Branch was cast to the ground (Ez.19:12), and no branch left on the vine fit for a ruler's sceptre (Ez.19:11, 14).

We should note that Ps.89 is very important, being a Proper Psalm for Christmas Day and cited by Luke in both his Gospel and in the Acts. See below (§§6.4, 8.6) for further commentary on it.

5.6 The "Verses of Cursing"?

C.S.Lewis famously said, "In some of the Psalms, the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth." (Reflections on the Psalms, 1958). It is customary today in many Anglican churches to miss out the "verses of cursing" when the Psalms are recited: Lewis refers to these verses as indulging a "luxury of hatred", but comments that they "won't come away 'clean'", because they are woven into the poems and cannot be cut out without crippling the poetry. Here Lewis, who was also a leading academic researcher in Old English literature, is very reliable. He claims very limited knowledge of pagan literature ("a little Greek, a little Latin, and of Old Norse very little indeed"), but this should be discounted as the humility of the very wise. His knowledge is (by all standards except his) encyclopædic.

Lewis points to Ps. 109 as a model of what he means: -

   Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy;
      let the satan stand at his right hand.
   When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
      and may his prayers be turned to sin.
   May his days be few;
      may another take his place of leadership.
   May his children be fatherless
      and his wife a widow.
   May a creditor seize all he has;
      may strangers plunder the fruits of his labour.
   May no one extend kindness to him
      or take pity on his fatherless children.
   May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD;
      may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.

Ps. 109:6ff

More shocking is the (otherwise) beautiful Ps.137 (see §6.1 below) :-

   Happy is the one who seizes your infants
      and dashes them against the rocks

Ps. 137:9

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11  Ez.17:3ff; cf. Is.4:2; 9:14; 11:1; 60:21; Jer.23:5; 33:15; Zech.3:8; 6:12
12  "scattered" the proud (Lk.1:51= Ps.89:10); "I have found David ..." (Acts 13:22=Ps.89:20).
"Worst of all" (says Lewis) "in The Lord is my shepherd, after the green pasture, the waters of comfort, the sure confidence in the valley of the shadow, we suddenly run across Thou shalt prepare a table for me against them that trouble me (Ps.23:5). … The poet's enjoyment of his present prosperity would not be complete unless those horrid enemies (who used to look down their noses at him) were watching it all and hating it. … the pettiness and vulgarity of it … are hard to endure."

Lewis makes the very interesting point that, comparing Jewish and pagan literature, the cursing of the Jews is "much more vindictive and vitriolic than [that of the] pagans":

If the Jews cursed more bitterly than the pagans this was, I think, at least in part because they took right and wrong more seriously. For if we look at their [Jewish] railings we find that they are usually angry not simply because these things have been done to them but because these things are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as the victim. … we can see, in the worst of their maledictions, how these old poets were, in a sense, near to God. Though hideously distorted by the human instrument, something of the Divine voice can be heard in these passages.

C.S.Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (1958) ch.3

I would not accept that the verses of cursing "hideously distort" the poems, but I think that Lewis' point here that they reflect the righteousness of God is entirely right. We must not read Psalms anachronistically. Jesus after all changed the rules dramatically when he insisted that we "love our enemies" (Matt.5:44; Luke 6:27, 35), and the psalms must be read with his injunction in mind.

Deborah sang, So let all thine enemies perish, O LORD: but let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might (Jud.5:31); and Joab upbraids David that thou lovest thine enemies, and hastest thy friends (2Sam.19:6): he is outraged that the natural order (loving your friends and hating your enemies) is overturned. And Jeremiah laments over Jerusalem that her friends ("lovers") hate her:

She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks
Among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her
All her friends have dealt treacherously with her
They are become her enemies.

Lam.1:2

When Jesus instructed us to "love our enemies" he was not making David's mistake of confusing our friends and our enemies, he was turning upside down the Jewish understanding of what the "Kingdom of God" was. They thought it was the rule under God of the King, the Son of David, over the Promised Land; with the Shekinah, the Glory, returned to the Temple, and the children of Israel returned at last from their long Exile.

This is a dense statement; God's King in Ps.2:2 (quoted by Peter and John and the whole Church in Acts 4:26) refers to the long-awaited Messiah;13 so does Son of David in Ps.110:1 (quoted by Jesus in Matt.21:44); and the land of promise has strong resonances (Ex.12:25; Deut.6:3; 9:28; 19:8; 27:3; Neh.9:15, 23; Heb.11:9). For Jesus, the prophecy of the Shekinah returning to the Temple (Eze.43:4; Zech.6:12; Rev.15:8) still referred to the future, and the people were still in exile, as witnessed by the very clear statement of Nehemiah (9:36)

13 But note that before Jesus in second-Temple Judaism ideas of Messiah were very varied, as N.T.Wright points out in great detail in his Jesus and the Victory of God (1996) and The Resurrection of the Son of God (2003). The people listening to Jesus would not have heard the clear idea that we hear when they heard Messiah.
But Jesus was determined to generalise this understanding. He preaches the Kingdom, meaning that the Land is now the whole earth, the People are now (potentially) all the people of the earth, the Temple is now no longer external in a building but in our hearts, the Glory is the Holy Spirit of God in our hearts, the Exile is ended and the King is enthroned!

This is also a dense statement. The Land is the whole earth:

Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. Ps.48:2

Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory Is.6:3

The People of God are (potentially) all people on earth:

... all the nations of the earth shall be blessed ...

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee Ps.22:27

God be merciful unto us, and bless us; and cause his face to shine upon us Selah

That thy way may be known upon earth

Thy saving health among all nations Ps.67:1f

His name shall endure for ever ...

men shall be blessed in him

all nations shall call him blessed Ps.72:17

All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O LORD And shall glorify thy name Ps.86:9

O praise the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people Ps.117:1

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD 's house shall be established ... and all nations shall flow unto it Is.2:2

And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast ... And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people and the vail that is spread over all nations.

He will swallow up death in victory

and the LORD God will wipe away tears from off all faces and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth

For the LORD hath spoken it Is.25:6ff

And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD. Is.66:23

At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the LORD; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem: neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart Jer.3:17

And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts Hag.2:7

Ps.117 is the shortest in the whole Book of Psalms, and we wonder, anachronistically, what it says. We don't notice that the point of the psalm is precisely that God is the God of the whole earth, not just of Israel! And if all people should be the People of God, it follows that the Enemy must be considered not as the nations but as the Accuser (1Chron.21:1; Job 1:6ff) with all his angels, powers and principalities in heavenly places!

The Temple is no longer external, neither is the Law; but the Glory of the Maker of heaven and earth –

Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? Is.66:1
and his Spirit, the light of his presence –

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
   If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there  Ps.139:7ff
   If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there …
   If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me
      Even the night shall be light about me.

are in the hearts of the People of God :

   *My heart* is inditing a good matter  Ps.45:1
      I speak of the things which I have made touching the king
      My tongue is the pen of a ready writer
   Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon
      the table of thine heart  Prov.3:3 (see also 7:3)
   I will put my law in *their inward parts*, and write it in *their hearts*; and will be
      their God, and they shall be my people  Jer.31:33
   Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and
      make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?  Ez.18:31
   And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will
      take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh  Ez.11:19; 36:26

It is crucially important that we understand what Jesus was doing. He was not replacing the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law, he was extending and generalising it! Newton's physics was not wrong, but Einstein, Schrödinger and the others generalised it. We still use Newtonian mechanics to send men to the moon – it works perfectly well!! – but we need the quantum mechanics to understand our computers, just as we need General Relativity to make the sat-navs in our cars work. Jesus had a new and revolutionary reading of the Old Testament – which had always been there although the people had not noticed!

   Thou art fairer than the children of men
   grace is poured into thy lips
      therefore God hath blessed thee for ever …
   Thine arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies …
   Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness
      therefore God, thy God, hath anointedit thee
         with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.  Ps.45:2ff

Jesus generalises the Old Covenant hatred of the wicked to hatred of wickedness. He has set his sights not merely on the defeat and destruction of the oppressor, but of death itself! Therefore Paul quotes Hosea: *Where O death is thy sting? Where O grave is thy victory* (Hos.13:4; 1Cor.15:55). When we read the "verses of cursing" in the Psalms, we must have in mind the ultimate cosmic purposes of God: to finally bring a right judgement that destroys death itself, to give resurrection in joy and peace to his people, and to wipe away the tears from every eye (Is.25:8; Rev.21:4).

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14 He quotes the LXX *verbatim*: this is significant in this context because translators always interpret – this is unavoidable – and Paul is interpreting Hosea. Many commentators have noted that Hosea may not have intended the gloss that Paul gives him: in any case the passage is difficult and perhaps open to various interpretations. But Paul ties down the interpretation, just as Jesus systematically tied down the interpretation of many obscure texts in the Old Testament that puzzled first century Jews. The obvious explicit example of this is when Philip explained Is.53 to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:34).
5.7 "Yah" as a name of God

Usually, the name of God is "YHWH" [יהוה], the four Hebrew consonants known as the "Tetragrammaton" and usually written out as "Yahweh" or in English simply "LORD". This is the place to comment that Hebrew is very ancient written language, dating from the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (c.1500BC); it was a script designed for carving on stone and is therefore written from right to left (the natural carving direction for right-handed people). It is also a consonantal script, omitting the vowels. Methods for indicating the vowels (so-called "vocalisation") do exist, but they are very late, not becoming finally established until the tenth century AD. The Hebrew text relies for the integrity of its transmission on the oral tradition: the text is only a mnemonic for the words! This gives a new slant on saying that the Bible is "the Word of God"! For the Hebrews this is literally true, since to read the text you have to rely on the memory of the words themselves!

But occasionally the emphatic form "Yah" (just the first two characters: [יה]) is used. This section explores the significance of this usage. The psalms which use this Name are: Pss. 68, 77, 89, 94, 102, 118, 122, 130, 135, 150.

"Yah" was first used by Moses in the Song of the Sea: "The LORD [Yah] is my strength and my song" (Ex.15:2), a crucially important passage quoted directly in Ps.118:14 and Is.12:2. The "I AM THAT I AM" (יהיה הוא יهو) response of God to Moses when he asked him his Name (Ex.3:14) crucially uses the 'Yah' form of the Name; this cryptic phrase is left untranslated by the editors of the Masoretic text: And God said to Moses, Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh. He continued, Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent me to you'. This is a very ancient text, explained further in the next verse using the regular

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15 Ex.3:14 has God explaining his Name to Moses: "I am that I am"; this phrase has "Yah" as a repeated emphatic phoneme. Note that the ancient Hebrew text (which is read from right-to-left, not left-to-right as in English!) was consonantal and intended as a mnemonic for reading aloud – vowels were not originally written down. "Jehovah" as used in the KJV is a sixteenth century mistake, misreading the (added) vocalisation of the Masoretic Text which was not completed in its present form until the tenth century AD. This vocalisation substitutes the vowels for "Adonai" for the vowels of YHWH, since observant Jews would not say the Lord's Name out loud. Apparently, the formal prohibition of this dates from at least the second century AD: "These are the ones who have no share in the world to come ... Abba Saul says: Also he that pronounces the Name with its proper letters" ( Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1). Msanah is from the period 70-200, and Saul was a rabbi from mid-second century (that is, after the final war with Rome that finally destroyed Jerusalem in 137). Quoted by N.T.Wright in The Resurrection of the Son of God (2003) ch.4 §4(ix).

It is interesting that modern Hebrew (in newspapers and books) uses an entirely consonantal script: vocalisation marks are not usually used at all. Text with vocalisation marks is read easily, but regarded as a higher (and archaic) form of the language, rather as we regard Shakespeare.

On the Tetragrammaton, Thomas Newberry explains this with a marginal note at Ex.3:7 of his Englishman's Bible (1883, edition published 1987 by Penfold Book and Bible House, printed by CUP): "[יהוה], composed of: He will be [יהיה], Being [יהי], and He was [יהי]". I do not know how much merit this interpretation has.

16 The Hebrew Bible published by the Jewish Publication Society (1985, 2nd ed.1999) notes ("CE" here is "Christian Era", that is, AD):- "Aaron ben Moses ben-Asher (Tiberias, c.930 CE). An industrious family of masoretes once lived in the Galilean town of Tiberias (an ancient center of Jewish scholarship). The last in their line of scholars was Aaron ... who authored a classic masoretic treatise. He is the first known scribe to complete a manuscript of the entire Bible" remember the Hebrew text is read right-to-left!

17 Jewish Publication Society: Hebrew-English Tanakh, 1985. They footnote the phrase: "meaning of Hebrew uncertain: variously translated, 'I am that I am', 'I am who I am', 'I will be who I will be' etc". It is interesting that in this modern Hebrew text of the Tanakh the chapter numbering (not part of the original of course) uses the Hebrew letters themselves as numbers. But the number 15 should be yod
Name of God. I have no doubt that Moses is recalling in his Song of the Sea this original explanation by God of his Name, and that Yah is the oldest and most emphatic proper name of God.

"Yah" is used only twice more outside Psalms, by Hezekiah in his psalm of praise after his recovery (emphatically: he uses "Yah" twice in Is.38:11\(^1\)) and by Solomon in his Song in the only mention of God in the whole book. This latter use is very interesting, and the passage is famous:

For love strong as death, ardour unyielding as Sheol,  
coals thereof coals of fire,  
flame of YAH [שלאבתיה]  
Many waters cannot quench love  
Song 8:6

(following NIV which I think has this right\(^2\)). That God is mentioned in this way is perhaps ultimately the reason the book was finally accepted as canonical. It makes explicit the allegorical undertones of the poem. Here is the rebuke to Augustine's misogyny: passionate love between man and woman is from God, and God's passion is like a flame. The psalmists understood this.

The first use of Yah in Psalms is Ps.68:4 ("Sing unto God, sing praises to his name: extol him that rideth upon the heavens by his name YHI, and rejoice before him"). This is notable since in this psalm David extensively quotes Deborah's psalm (Judges 5), deliberately looking back to the archaic language of a major national triumph. This opening verse is an emphatic allusion to Moses' psalm, which of course was also a model for Deborah; Moses leading Israel out of Egypt, with God destroying Pharaoh in the sea, is foundational for both Jews and Christians: both regard Moses as a representative of the great Liberator – God himself! – and the Passover feast is one of the basic marks of the Jew. Christians take this further, worshipping the Paschal Lamb who is the cosmic reality behind those historical lambs then whose blood on the doors sheltered those particular people from the angel of death. When David quotes Moses like this he is timelessly evoking the Covenant: he is saying, "God did these wonderful works for our fathers then, just as he will do wonderful works for us today, and will continue to do wonderful works for our children yet unborn". God's impossibilities are not limited in time; they are of cosmic significance and will continue to transform both the world and the people of God.

\(^1\) This reference to "death", startling to us, I think was alluded to by Hosea (13:14) in the exclamation "Where O death is thy sting? / Where O Sheol is thy victory?", which is inserted as an apparently extraneous interjection in the prophesy against Israel of that chapter. Why did Hosea develop the husband theme so singlemindedly in the opening chapters? I think he had the Song in the front of his mind, and specifically this verse on the passionate love of God. And Hosea couldn't bear the unremitting awfulness of his prophesy, and was impelled to insert this reference to the Song. Incidentally, if this suggestion has any merit it is an argument for Solomon himself authoring the Song (since it must be earlier than 722), contradicting general scholarly opinion now which makes the book very late.

By the way, the Song is held in very high regard by the Jews. It is important liturgically, and Rabbi Akiba (~40-137) said of it (in the context of a debate on whether the book should be regarded as canonical), "The whole world is not as worthy as the day the Song was given to Israel" (Mishnah Yadayim 3:5). Quoted by Boris Bobrinskoy, Le mystère de la Trinité (1986, transl. A.P.Gythiel: The Mystery of the Trinity, 1999, §1.6)

\(^2\) "I shall not see YAH, YAH in the land of the living"

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It is the *Hallelujah* psalms at the end of *Psalms* which make us most familiar with God's name YAH. *Hallelu Yah* [נַּחַלָּוָה] is left untranslated in English: it means, "Praise the LORD!" These five psalms (Pss.146-150) are the extended doxology that completes *Psalms*: recall that the name of the book in Hebrew is *Praises!* This small collection was placed here by the ancient editors specifically to emphasise the purpose of the whole book. Perhaps they composed Ps.150 especially for the purpose? *Hallelu Yah* says, *YH is my strength and my song*: he holds me firm in the mighty waters, we are his people: many waters cannot quench the flame of the love of *YH*.

Ps.135 is the *Hallelujah* Psalm that follows the collection of fifteen "Songs of Ascent" that immediately follow Ps.119. *Hallelu Yah* occurs in this psalm both at the beginning and end, and also in verse 3. We can here start to see the way the Exilic collectors of Book 5 of *Psalms* have structured the book. The *Songs of Ascent* are bracketed at the start by the extended acrostic meditation on the lovely Law of God (Ps.119), and at the end by three psalms: the *Hallelujah* Ps.135, the liturgical Ps.136 and the heart-rending Ps.137. Then follows the final David collection of 8 psalms (Pss.138-145), ending with the *Praises* that give the whole book its Hebrew name (Pss.146-150). The other *Hallelujah* psalms are Pss.104, 105, 106, 115, 116, 117. The *Hallelujah* terminating Ps.106 is in the doxology that terminates Book IV, and the *Hallelujah* in Ps.115 is emphasised (v.18: we will bless *YH* . . . *Hallelujah!*).

When the psalmists use "YAH" they are always looking back to the *Song of the Sea*, as is Heman in his terrible psalm that concludes Book III (Who is mighty like you, *O YH*? Ps.89:8b; considered at length in §9.6). The importance of memory is underlined in the chapter on the History psalms (§6), and David's cry in the important *Jeduthun* psalm (*I will remember the deeds of YH*, Ps.77:11) is considered specifically in §6.1.

Two psalms in Book IV use this emphatic Name of God, Pss.94 & 102; *(Happy is the man you discipline, O YH*, Ps.94:12; . . . that a people yet to be created may praise YH [נַחַלָּוָה – YHLL-YH], Ps.102:18), and both of these too are subtly recalling the *Song of the Sea*. The latter is the "prayer of an afflicted man": were not the children of Israel afflicted by

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21 Pss.146,147,148,149,150 begin and end with *Hallelujah*. Five is the number of the grace of God: he holds us in his hand.

22 Eight on the other hand is another interesting number. It is twice four, where for Jews four is the number of God (because of the tetragrammaton – four letters in God's Name), with eight an intensification of four. This is also justified another way: One is of course the number of God, since God is One. Two is the number of man; that is, man-and-woman together made in the image of God. Three (one plus two) is therefore the number of godly man (where again, "man" is a synecdoche for man-and-woman). And then four is the number of the adoption by God of Israel, the number of the covenant.

For Christians this works similarly, but with interesting differences. Three is now regarded as the number of the love of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), and therefore four as the number of God with his bride, the redeemed church of God. Eight for Christians is of course the number of the Resurrection, since Elijah raised one child from death, Elisha two people (nb: 2Kings 13:21), Jesus three named people, and Peter and Paul one each.

I am not a cabalist: the largest number I am prepared to interpret is 153 (=17x9). There is a special reason for this; the number is given a curious prominence in John 21:11. 17 is the number of both Books III and IV of *Psalms*, and 9 is 3^2 – the number of the love of God doubly intensified. Letters were used to represent numbers both by Jews and by Greeks, and arithmetic was treated then as sacred knowledge, proper to priests, so it is legitimate to interpret numbers a little, especially small ones. This Psalm (89) there is also v.49; *O Lord [נִצְנָה], where is your steadfast love of old?* The Jewish Publication Society editors of the Masoretic text do not mark this as the Name of God; nevertheless, it is almost "Ehyeh" as in Ex.15:2 but just substituting *aleph* [א] for the first *heh* [ה]. I suspect that the psalmist uses this wording deliberately.
Pharaoh, and were they not rescued by God, triumphing over Pharaoh at the Sea? And the former is about righteousness and justice (the foundation of [David's] throne, Ps.72:2), and about the vengeance of God on the wicked. Did Pharaoh treat the Israelites justly? Did he not harden his heart against the urgent command of God?

Robert Alter thinks that it is "highly likely" that Ps.122 was composed at the time of Josiah, when the Temple was purified. I think that the use of the emphatic and archaic Name of God (… the tribes of YH, Ps.122:4) has a context that supports this: in this verse "tribes" is repeated but this is not a word used in Books I or II of Psalms, it is characteristic of later times when the prophets started to write down their words from the Lord. This psalm has extended alliterative word-play on the shalom root of Jerusalem; the psalmist is speaking of the peace of the city, where the city represents at once the nation, and the presence and protection of God, and the stability of the promises of God (God the Rock, Ps.18:2; Deut.32:4). "Jerusalem is built like a city joined fast together" (v.3), refers immediately to its impregnable walls and metaphorically to the protective shadow of God's lovingkindness. The allusion to the Song of the Sea is designed to underline this intention of the poet.

Ps.130, like Ps.122 a song of ascents, also alludes to the Song of the Sea to encourage Israel to "wait" for God's lovingkindnesses to be revealed, in this case in the face of the sins of the people. Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD: Lord hear my voice! The Psalmist continues: Were you, O YH, to watch for sins / Master, who could endure? (Ps.130:3). Robert Alter comments on this psalm:

The verb sh-m-r in this [verse] has the particular sense of "keep track of" [Hence, KJV has: if thou shouldest mark iniquities], but the translation "watch for" preserves the play in the Hebrew with the double occurrence of the same verbal stem [in v.6] more than the dawn-watchers watch for the dawn … Previous translators have all supplied a predicate [for v.6: My soul waits for the LORD]. But the power of the line in the original is precisely that the anticipated verb ("wait" having appeared twice in the preceding line) is choked off:

My being for the Master —
more than the dawn-watchers watch for the dawn
Ps.130.6, transl. R.Alter

(The Hebrew noun boqer also has the more general sense of "morning", but in this context of watchmen through the night awaiting the first light, "dawn" is strongly indicated.) Previous translators rendered the four Hebrew words mishomrim laboqer shomrim laboqer as a simple repetition [eg. Jewish Publication Society has "than watchmen for the morning, watchmen for the morning"; see also NIV]. But shomrim can be either a verbal noun ("watchmen") or a plural verb ("watch"). The line becomes more vivid and energetic if the second occurrence is understood as a verb: more than the watchmen watch for the dawn. I watch — elliptically implied — for the LORD. The force of the image is evident: the watchmen sitting through the last of the three watches of the night, peering into the darkness for the first sign of dawn, cannot equal my intense expectancy for God's redeeming word to come to me in my dark night of the soul.


The rule in Hebrew poetry (and narrative) is that repetition intensifies. It is never static. So I think Alter must have this right here. Hebrew poetry has no redundancy: like all good poetry it is terse, often relying heavily on allusion, implication, and ellipsis.

The powerful psalm of triumph, Ps.118, is considered at length below in §9.8. But here we must point out its extraordinary use of the emphatic Name of God. First, the Psalmist quotes directly from the Song of the Sea — YH is my strength and song (the consonantal texts of Ps.118:14 and Ex.15:2 are identical). This is Moses' first line after Miriam's opening, and it is the turning point of Ps.118 where oppression turns into victory.

The first line of the psalm after the antiphonal prologue is:

In distress I called on YH; YH answered me and brought me relief
Ps.118:5 (JPS)
This is the wording of the Jewish Publication Society translation, but the allusive nature of this verse is demonstrated by the very large differences in wording between different translations. Robert Alter has the literal translation (following KJV),

> From the straits I called to YH; YH answered me in a wide open place  
> Ps.118:5 (Alter)

But NIV interprets somewhat and I think captures the force of the verse,

> In my anguish I cried to the LORD [YH], and he [YH] answered by setting me free  
> Ps.118:5 (NIV)

NIV says what the poet means, but Alter renders accurately what he says (and JPS does neither excellently!) This is another example of the Biblical poets packing a concentrated emotional intensity into a very restrained expression, with the very understatement itself enhancing the emotional force. And the repeated use of the archaic Name only emphasises this.

We should note here that this verse looks back to Ps.18:19, "He brought me forth also into a large place" (KJV). Both psalms are national cries of victory on big occasions (we consider Ps.18 further in §6.7). The literally large (or spacious) place implies relief or even freedom. The word used in both psalms has the same root m-r-t-b [מרוח] and the same force; all of these ideas are implied and the various translations emphasise one or other of the aspects. The value of the literal translation is that it makes the allusive language of the poet immediately clear to the reader.

The centre of the psalm has, uniquely, a three-fold use of the archaic Name of God:

> shall not die but live [יהי - ehyeh] and proclaim the works of YH
> YH punished me severely … open the gates of victory that I may enter and praise YH  
> Ps.118:17ff

Notice that the poet uses a resonant word for "live", literally "be" (that is, "I am"), which is identical to that used in Ex.3:14 when God speaks of his own Name.

*The works of YH?* The poet points us, with this wording, directly to the Song of the Sea: "Horse and driver he has hurled into the sea!" (Ex.3:15, 21). This is the wonderful work of God that is the representative of all his wonderful works!

*YH punished me severely?* Oppression and misery were usually related in the archaic texts with punishment, although this is not explicit in the story of Israel in Egypt. But the continuing story of the Exodus makes it very plain that the travail of Israel in the wilderness was directly related to their wickedness. If they were not innocent in the wilderness, is it likely that they were innocent in Egypt? Nevertheless, the text does not deny Israel’s innocence under Pharaoh. For the psalmist of Ps.118 there is also some ambivalence. Of course, Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon because of the unfaithfulness of Judah. Nevertheless, the sons of Korah had commented only a few years earlier that "you have scattered us among the nations ... All this happened to us though we had not forgotten you, nor been false to your covenant" (Ps.44:11,17): collective punishment always catches the innocent too! So when the poet of Ps.118 acknowledges that God has punished him (singular), he is speaking both for the nation (which collectively is guilty) and also for those in the nation who have not "bowed the knee to Baal" (1Kings 19:18), who vicariously and innocently accept the punishment of their people: "the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Is.53:5). Surely, the redemption of God counts as perhaps the most wonderful of all his works?
Open the gates of victory that I may enter and praise YH (Ps.118:19) "Gates of Victory" can, and perhaps should, be rendered Gates of Righteousness [ts-d-q]. Righteousness is the crucial characteristic of the King (Ps.72:1f; 2Sam.8:15; 1Kings 3:6; 10:9; 2Chron. 9:8). This idea is new: it does not look back to Moses, but it does look back to David taking Jerusalem in the first place,

Lift up you heads O you gates
be lifted up, you ancient doors
that the King of Glory may come in
Who is this King of Glory?
The L ORD strong and mighty
The L ORD mighty in battle
Lift up you heads O you gates
be lifted up, you ancient doors
that the King of Glory may come in …

Ps.24:7ff

and in this psalm David looks forward to the glory of the L ORD filling Solomon's Temple (1Kings 8:11; 2Chron.5:14; 7:1ff). But Ezekiel saw the glory of the L ORD leaving the Temple (Ez.10:18), and only saw a vision of it returning again (Ez.43:4f). But it never did return! Herod's temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD70; it was not the temple filled with smoke from God's glory seen by John on Patmos (Rev.15:8) – that temple was in heaven! Ps.118 is certainly about Ezra's temple (Ezra 6:14) since it is an "altar" psalm (Ps.118:27), but the poet is not claiming either the glory of God or the presence of God in the temple, he is claiming the wonderful provision of rescue by God (represented by the newly completed temple) in just the same way that the children of Israel were rescued from Egypt.

Who can match the glory of the L ORD, coming in through the Gates of Victory in triumph?
We return to the Song of the Sea :-

Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, working wonders? Ex.15:11

The King of Righteousness, he brings us the victory!
6 The history psalms and the impossibilities of God

Memory is characteristic of humans. The stories people tell determine much about their societies. Moreover, the stories we tell each other determine what we can imagine. What do we want? And what do we want the future to bring?

We are told that we cannot determine the future, and of course this is true. But we certainly can influence the future, and we do this by first imagining it. It is men and women of vision that change the destiny of a people. And again, it is the stories we tell that make such a vision tangible.

Historians ought to be revolutionaries. Shakespeare wrote the History Plays specifically because there was a demand for re-evaluating the past in the Elizabethan court. England was asserting her independence of Spain and Rome, and indeed of France; from the shadow of Philip (unfinished business from Mary's reign), from the burgeoning Counter-Reformation which was a very present political threat both at that time and for a century afterwards, and replacing French – the old language of power – with the new and flowering English, rich and vigorous. And Shakespeare continues to be played in surprising and revolutionary contexts: in §7.2 we refer to Richard III being played in Bucharest in 1976; in this play Richard, the antihero ("the bloody dog"), hands dripping innocent blood, sues his dead brother’s wife for her daughter's hand.

Queen Elizabeth: What were I best to say? Her father’s brother
    Would be her lord? Or shall I say her uncle? …
King Richard: Say she shall be a high and mighty queen
Queen Elizabeth: To wail the title, as her mother does
King Richard: Your reasons are too shallow and too quick
Queen Elizabeth: O no! My reasons are too deep and dead
    Too deep and dead, poor infants, in their graves
King Richard: Harp not on that string madam, that is past
Queen Elizabeth: Harp on it still shall I till heartstrings break …
King Richard: I swear –
Queen Elizabeth: by nothing ; for this is no oath …
King Richard: Now, by the world –
Queen Elizabeth: ’Tis full of thy foul wrongs …
King Richard: Why then by God –
Queen Elizabeth: God's wrong is most of all …
    If thou hadst fear'd to break an oath by him
The imperial metal, circling now thy head
Had graced the tender temples of my child
And both the princes had been breathing here
Which now, two tender bedfellows for dust
Thy broken faith hath made them prey for worms
What canst thou swear by now?
King Richard: The time to come
Queen Elizabeth: That thou hast wronged in the time o’erpast
    For I myself have many tears to wash
Hereafter time for time past wrong’d by thee
The children live, whose fathers thou hast slaughter’d
Ungoverned youth, to wail it in their age :
The parents live, whose children thou hast butcher’d
Old barren plants, to wail it with their age.
Swear not by time to come ; for that thou hast
Misused ere used, by times ill-used o’erpast
Shakespeare, Richard III Act IV (First Folio 1623)
History is tragedy: the mother's heartstrings break when thinking of her children prey for worms; tragedy is that meditation on the times past that have poisoned the times to come: the princes that should be quick (living and laughing) are deep and dead, deep and dead – Elizabeth weeping for her children, because they are not (Jer.31:15)!

Who we were, who we are; who we ought to be, and who we could become: these are the proper concerns of historians, and these are the issues that underlie Psalms. The psalmists are always revolutionaries: "Turn us ... that we may be saved" – Asaph makes this the refrain of his song set to "The lilies of the Covenant" (Ps.80). Lilies evoke love, and the Covenant is the expression of the love of God. Could we become those loved by God (Rom.1:7; 1Thess.1:4)? — and how would the world be were it filled with the resulting peace that passeth all understanding (Phil.4:7)?

History is first of all ontological: it helps us see who we are. For all the Biblical writers, and especially the psalmists, this involved participating in the purposes of God: purposes which are always unexpected and disturbing since God takes delight in doing what we consider as impossible. The first three sections in this chapter address this from different points of view: firstly philosophical; then a recapitulation of my introductory comments to the whole book, that history is central for Christians (and Jews); and then a case study of how a first century Jew (Stephen) had internalised the History Psalms 105 & 106 such that the attitude of the psalmists dominated his worldview.

The fourth section returns to ontology, now from a completely different point of view. We consider the many textual repetitions that occur in Psalms as a stylistic feature to be interpreted as expressions of the worldview of the ancient editors. Who did they think they were, and what did they think they were doing? The text is itself an historical artefact, an artefact which can itself be taken as intrinsic evidence and pressed critically for meaning. I promised at the outset that I would be adopting the "critical realist" stance that N.T.Wright carefully explained in his magisterial "Christian Origins" series of books; here this stance is explicit.

We then address in detail an aspect of Psalms that has preoccupied generations of scholars: their liturgical context (with the manifestly liturgical Ps.136 as the example), that is, how the psalms were originally used. Considering their original historical context is another aspect of a "critical realist" approach to Psalms.

Tragedy looms large in every history, mostly because peace and security are not usually very noteworthy – news is bad almost by definition! We will treat the lament psalms in the next Chapter but here, as a necessary introduction and taking Ps.78 as an example, we include a section on History as Lament.

Finally, there is a long section on the crucially important subject of the Covenants, taking Pss.18 & 107 as specific examples. Biblical history is not "objective" and dry! The Bible is about the purposes of God, expressed again and again in terms of Covenant. Biblical history is explicitly relational: the biblical writers are always trying to get us to understand that what he has done is a sure guide to what he will do. Covenant is usually treated theologically today, but here I argue strongly that, on the contrary, Covenant should be treated primarily historically. We can do the theology only in the context of the history. For both Jews and Christians, covenant is historical, and history is covenantal.

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1. see §7.3 n.8
2. Paul's comment on ontology is illuminating: "God, who quickeneth the dead, ... calleth those things which be not as though they were" (θεου του ζωοποιουντος τους νεκρους ... καλουντος τα μη οντα ως οντα, theou tou zoopoioountos tous nekrous ... kalountos ta me onta os onta; Rom.4:17)
6.1 God's rationality and our ontological security

"I call to mind", says Asaph: "the acts of Yah, when I recall your wonders of old; I recite all your works, your acts I rehearse" (Ps.77:11). There are two pairs of linked verbs in this verse of Asaph's: call / recall, and recite / rehearse. Call is call to mind (with oneself, not someone else, as the dative object): thus, call and recall are simple synonyms. Similarly, recite is verbal and rehearse is mental: again, in context they are synonyms. I think that one could not find a more emphatic (indirect) way to speak about the importance of remembrance.

Remembering is one of the important themes of the Hebrew Scriptures: Ps.77 is only one (important) example. God remembers Noah (a righteous man; Gen.8:1), and he remembers Abraham and Rachel (Gen.19:29; 30:22). God remembers his covenant (Gen.9:15f; Ex.2:24; 6:5; Lev.26:42, 45). God says to Israel (and to us) through Isaiah, Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me (Is.46:9); God is specifically interested in the first and the last :-

Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his [Israel's] redeemer the LORD of hosts;
I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God …

They that make a graven image are all of them vanity …

Remember these [idols], O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant: I have formed thee;
Thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me.
I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins:
Return unto me; for I have redeemed thee.
Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it:
Shout, ye lower parts of the earth:
Break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein:
For the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel.

Isaiah 44:6ff (emphatic pronouns indicated)

I am the first and I am the last: Almighty God is the Maker of heaven and earth, the Creator, the originator of all things. And also he see the end from the beginning, he already has the last things in mind! And he has revealed his deep purposes to us using deeply personal terms: the emphatic singular pronouns I and thou!

One of the characteristics of the righteous man is that he remembers what God has done. The righteous man is a student of history; the righteous man keeps a diary! Indeed, to remember is one of the Commandments (Ex.20:8), and Moses commanded the people to remember at the Passover (Ex.13:3). Remembrance is a quality of the Covenant, as Moses makes very clear in Deuteronomy: remember the days of old, he sings (32:7); again and again he enjoins Israel to remember their slavery in Egypt and the mighty hand of God's rescue (5:15; 7:18; 8:2; 15:15; 16:3, 12; 24:18), their times of provoking the LORD (9:7), and the very fact that only the LORD is the source of wonderful blessing for them (8:18).

A magician performs wonders for entertainment, or perhaps for more baleful purposes involving the obtaining of personal advantage by manipulation. But we have already seen that God's wonders are intrinsic to his character and always point to his underlying purpose.

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3 Robert Alter's translation. Alter has tried to make a poetical literal translation, that is, he has tried to render the Hebrew and its allusions and idioms as literally as possible (taking KJV as a model), while retaining as much of the rhythm as he can (which KJV does not do). He also tries (and here succeeds) in rendering the assonances of the Hebrew into English, allowing us closer access to the intention of the poet.
one way or another. How does God act? Wonderfully, and with purpose! And what is his purpose? To rescue his people!

The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying,
Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass
and as I have purposed, so shall it stand:
That I will break the Assyrian in my land, and upon my mountains tread him under foot
then shall his yoke depart from off [Israel], and his burden depart from off their shoulders.
This is the purpose that is purposed upon the whole earth
and this is the hand that is stretched out upon all the nations.
For the LORD of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it?
and his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back? Isaiah 14:24ff

The whole of Creation is physically structured wonderfully, and the whole of cosmic history is subject to the wonderful purposes of God. And it is worth re-emphasising this point: that just as wonderful purpose is supernatural, so is the human perception of wonderful structure. We wonder at God's impossibilities, and rightly so.

How do we know who we are, amid all the troubles of the world? Are we simply insignificant flotsam bobbing around briefly on the waters of chaos? Today, we have had a thousand years to get used to the idea of the world being a rational place in principle – and that idea after all is the foundation of the idea of "laws of nature" that underlie all scientific activity! It now takes us an effort of the imagination to remember that in the long sweep of human history this attitude is an anomaly. Most people at most times have believed that the gods were capricious, and that the only things certain in life were death and taxes.

Faithless Israel was the same as everybody else; but faithful Israel, above all the psalmists and the prophets, was different. Faithful Israel looked to God their Rock (Deut.32:4) to faithfully discharge his Covenant day by day, and generation by generation, in unpredictable and surprising – wonderful – ways. The people of God were secure in the promises of God.

### 6.2 History as central to the Gospel

"Events, dear boy, events" is what Harold Macmillan is supposed to have responded to a journalist when asked what is most likely to blow governments off course. Arnold Toynbee remarked: "some historians hold the view that history is 'just one damned thing after another'." We also, with Toynbee, disapprove of such "antinomian" (as he called them) views. History can be understood – there are patterns that can be appreciated, and

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4 I use supernatural in a literal way, meaning above nature, where by nature I mean our current understanding of natural law. There is no account of purpose in our present understanding of physical laws, thus purpose is necessarily supernatural according to our present understanding. Similarly, our perception of structure depends on our wonderful ability to grasp the whole, to infer the whole from the part. But Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems guarantee that it is logically incoherent to assert that any consistent logical system is complete, and therefore any perception of an entire structure must be at an intuitive level, not a logical one. Again, there is no account of intuition in our present understanding of physical laws: it is necessarily supernatural in this literal sense. See my essay on Miracles at §3.6 for further information.


underlying the events are the settled purposes of God. And we have seen (above, §6.1) that remembering what has happened is a Covenant injunction!

Jesus commented that "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light" (Luke 16:8) and it was Eric Hobsbawm who asserted that "it is the business of historians to remember what others forget".\(^7\) Jesus implies that it is the business of Christians to "discern the signs of the times" (Matt.16:3), and how can one do that without a good grasp of the history? Christians need to understand their own history, just like everybody else, but they also need to understand it in the context of "Salvation History",\(^8\) the history of the People of God that is precisely the subject of the Bible.

Reading the Acts of the Apostles it is striking that the accounts of the faith, that Dr. Luke records the Apostles making, are all more or less "thumbnail" histories. The most explicit example of this is the extended speech of Stephen to the Sanhedrin in ch.7 (see section §6.3 below), but Paul does the same in the synagogue of Psidian Antioch (ch.13), and again in Athens (in a form suitable for Greeks, ch.17). Once we realise that the Evangelist is trying to tell us about "the kingdom of God" and the "hope of Israel" promised historically by the "Law and the Prophets" revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 28:20,23,31) we see it everywhere. Peter's first speech (ch.2) explains what is going on specifically in terms of the prophecies of Joel and David, with the argument revolving about the "patriarch" David,\(^9\) David dead and buried among Peter's auditors but who trusted in the promise of God, which after a millennium is before their very eyes (v.29ff).

Luke's Introduction to his Gospel makes the same point in a different way. He wants Theophilus to know that his account is reliable, that these things did indeed happen. And he underlines the importance to him (Luke), as the recorder of these events, of eyewitness evidence. Richard Bauckham\(^10\) presents the whole Gospel of John as an implicit statement similar to Luke's opening explicit claim. He points out that the witness of Peter (the leader) comes at the start and end of the book, but there is a witness (presumably the "disciple Jesus loved", presumably the evangelist) who is prior to Peter at the start (John 1:37) and who has the last word (John 21:24). Thus the evangelist underlines the reliability of his account with the bracketing of Peter (the reported) by the eyewitness (the reporter).

Paul makes exactly the same point in 1Cor.15:3-8, here clearly using a formula that is widely regarded as the earliest documentary evidence we have of very early Christian practice and belief. From the beginning, the Christians always claimed to be eyewitnesses of historical events – that is what "martyr" means!\(^11\) But events must always be interpreted, and this is why Dr. Luke calls the Bereans noble (Acts 17:11): "for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true". Paul told them what happened in Jerusalem at the Passover that\(^\star\)

\(^7\) E.J.E.Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (1994). Hobsbawm (9th June 1917 – 1st October 2012) was a prominent British Marxist historian, respected across the political divide. His books were never published in the Soviet Union. His series of four books *The Age of…*, covering the period 1789 to 1989 (the "Long" 19th century and the "Short" 20th century) is highly recommended.

\(^8\) I think that Rudolf Bultmann's idea of *Heilsgeschichte* (see *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschichte*, 1941; "Revelation and Salvation History") is a good one, even if I generally deprecate Bultmann's reading of Scripture.

\(^9\) "Patriarch": πατριαρχός (patriarchōs). David was not a patriarch in the sense Abraham was, but in the sense of God's promise "I will establish your line forever" made no less than three times in Ps.89 (vv.4,29,36; see 2Sam.7:16; 1Chron.17:14). It is to this promise that Peter is drawing particular attention.


\(^11\) Bauckham (ibid) points out that martyr was originally a Greek technical legal word, referring to the witness given in court. Its meaning was changed by subsequent Christian usage.
Jesus rose from the dead, but they did not look in the Scriptures to confirm his report of what happened: they looked to the Scriptures to confirm his explanation of *what it meant*!

It is worth emphasising the philosophical point that History is always written by *historians*, who *always* have a point of view. It is another Enlightenment myth that history can be purely objective: it cannot since it is always the representation by *somebody* of what happened. There is no such thing as an interesting fact. A historian who managed to be entirely objective would be very boring, and his books would be unreadable. A fact in itself is never interesting. What is almost invariably interesting is the *significance* of the fact.

History is absolutely central for Christians:

Yf in thys lyfe only we beleve on Chriſt then are we off all men the miſerableſt.  
Now is Chriſt ryſen from deeth …  
1Cor.15:19 (Tyndale, 1526)

If Christ is not risen then we are the *miserableſt* of men. But Christ *is* risen! This is an *historical* assertion, and it changes everything!

**6.3 Psalms 105 & 106 as a model for Stephen**

This same attitude, of taking a particular reading of history as normative, permeating the whole of the New Testament, is also emphasised in the *Book of Psalms*. Indeed, one could say that the pair of Psalms at the end of Book IV were a model for Stephen. The parallels with Ps.105 seem to be quite explicit. Stephen follows the psalm in mentioning the "patriarchs" Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, and the work of Joseph and Moses; and he even refers to the climax of the psalm "[God] remembered his holy promise".

I do not claim that Stephen must have consciously modelled his speech on this pair of psalms: although as we see below there is a clear formal link with Ps.105 which is absent from the comparison with Ps.106; in any case, all of the events are very well rehearsed all over the Scriptures and one could represent the speech (and the psalms) as clichéd. But I think that our texts, both Hebrew and Greek, are too well constructed to make the claim of cliché very plausible. I think that the fact that these Psalms are together in the scroll and are very obviously a related pair, is a fact which devout people would have thought about deeply, and which would have constrained and guided their thinking.

Table 2 lists the various ways in which Stephen's speech parallels the psalm's structure, and it is noticeable that the speech even follows the order of the psalm. There are three exceptions: the psalm concatenates the two covenants with Abraham; it reverses the temporal order of the famine and of Joseph being freed to draw attention to the foreknowledge of God; and the fulfilment of the promises of God is the climax of the psalm, but it is only halfway through what Stephen wants to say so he gives it a different emphasis.

Pss.105 & 106 are as a pair are light and darkness. We have already noted above\(^\text{12}\) the way Ps.105 is about the "shouts of joy" of "his chosen ones" (v.43) who "remember" the wonders, mighty works and judgements of the God of Glory; and Ps.106 about the "rebellion" of the LORD's "inheritance", who "forgot" the God who had saved them and showed them "wonders" in Egypt. Stephen specifically wants to turn the tables on his accusers, and his accusation takes a remarkably similar general form to that of Ps.106, as is laid out in Table 3 below. Neither Stephen's accusers nor the Israel that the psalmist accuses appreciate God's promises, and both Stephen and the psalmist make use of the same series of incidents to make their points.

\(^{12}\) §3.3 n.12
Table 2 Psalm 105 as an explicit model for Stephen

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Ps.105</th>
<th>Acts 7</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Command: remember his wonders?</td>
<td>v.5</td>
<td>v.2ff</td>
<td>Acts: implicit remembering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covenant with Abraham</td>
<td>v.9</td>
<td>v.8 et passim</td>
<td>Two covenants with Abraham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possess the land</td>
<td>v.11</td>
<td>v.5</td>
<td>Two covenants with Abraham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph a slave</td>
<td>v.17</td>
<td>v.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph freed &amp; given wisdom</td>
<td>v.20ff</td>
<td>v.10</td>
<td>Psalm: God's foreknowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famine in the land</td>
<td>v.16</td>
<td>v.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel lived in Ham as aliens</td>
<td>v.23</td>
<td>v.16</td>
<td>Acts: they weren't buried there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel increased in Egypt</td>
<td>v.24</td>
<td>v.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt turns against Israel</td>
<td>v.25</td>
<td>v.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses' &quot;wonders&quot; &amp; &quot;signs&quot;</td>
<td>v.27</td>
<td>v.36</td>
<td>Acts quotes LXX verbatim(^{13})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God remembers his promise</td>
<td>v.42</td>
<td>v.17</td>
<td>God fulfils his promise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So, Stephen calls Jesus "the Righteous One", not "the Anointed One", just as Ps.106 opens by drawing attention to Judgement and Justice. In one way this a variation on a theme, since the Anointed One is the King, and the King's primary function is to "judge justly" (Ps.72 etc). But the point of Ps.106 is that God has provided rulers, leaders and prophets, and the people refused to recognise them, and Stephen's point is that the rulers did not recognise Jesus.

They are both concerned with whom God appointed as leaders and whether Israel recognised them. Fleshly desire, rebellion and judgement drive both compositions. They both emphasise the Reed Sea and the Calf – of course these are the primary symbols of the Covenant and the rebellion of Israel.

Stephen's argument drew on the whole historical record together with the prophets, even quoting Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel directly.\(^{14}\) But his summary has the same sort of rhetorical force as has Ps.106, with a clearly derivative rhetorical structure (whether consciously or unconsciously).

Interestingly, Stephen is charged with blasphemy against the Temple and by implication the identity of Israel and the faithfulness of God; he implicitly accepts this charge by pointing to the essential redundancy of the Temple (Acts 7:48), but forcefully claiming orthodoxy (admittedly of a deeply subversive kind) in both the content and the very structure of his argument. No wonder they murdered him.

Steeped in the Scriptures, Stephen turns them to prophetic use. The Psalms teach us how to respond to God: having learnt to respond to him, we have also learnt how to hear him! Having opened our hearts to him, our ears are also opened, and our mouths respond. If we know how to praise him, we also know how to bring his word to the people in the situation we find ourselves in today.

\(^{13}\) Acts & LXX both have: "wonder" = τερας (teras); "sign" = σημαινο (semaino)

\(^{14}\) Acts 7:43 = Amos 5:25ff; Acts 7:49f = Isaiah 66:1f; Acts 7:51 = Jer.9:26; 17:23; Ezek.44:7ff;
Table 3 Psalm 106 as an implicit model for Stephen

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item (psalm)</th>
<th>Ps.106</th>
<th>Acts 7</th>
<th>Comment (Stephen)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God remembers Covenant</td>
<td>v.45</td>
<td>v.32</td>
<td>Covenant statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel forgets</td>
<td>vv.7,13,21</td>
<td>v.51</td>
<td>&quot;resisting the Spirit&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reed Sea and the desert</td>
<td>v.7ff</td>
<td>v.36</td>
<td>Reed Sea and the desert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rebellion at Meribah</td>
<td>v.7</td>
<td>v.39</td>
<td>&quot;hearts turned back to Egypt&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;bent on rebellion&quot;</td>
<td>vv. 32f,43</td>
<td>vv.35</td>
<td>reject Moses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disbelieve promise &amp; disobey</td>
<td>v.25</td>
<td>v.52f</td>
<td>law received but not obeyed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice &amp; judgement</td>
<td>v.3</td>
<td>v.51f</td>
<td>&quot;The Righteous One&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses, Aaron, Phineas &amp; the nations</td>
<td>vv.16,23,30,41</td>
<td>vv.27,35</td>
<td>Who made you ruler &amp; judge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calf eats grass – no Glory!</td>
<td>v.19f</td>
<td>v.41 et passim</td>
<td>Calf – and heavenly bodies!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God sends plague</td>
<td>v.29</td>
<td>v.42</td>
<td>God abandons them to idolatry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God hands them over to the nations</td>
<td>v.41</td>
<td>v.43</td>
<td>God exiles them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For us, history is not an ancillary activity, something which might be "quite interesting" but not really very theologically significant. For us history is an essential part of theology, an odd idea for Enlightenment man, dazzled by Platonic idealism. Reality is a story! It is for this reason that I insist on treating the historical psalms separately in their own chapter. Of course, this category is only of limited usefulness: all Psalms are impossible to pigeon hole, that is not the way Scripture works. But it is useful, and necessary, to emphasise the essential way that history is woven inextricably into Scripture. God "remembers" his covenant (Pss.105:8, 42; 106:45); so therefore we need to "remember" his wonders and his kindness (Pss.105:5; 106:7, 13, 21).

Stephen probably did not deliberately set out to model his speech to the Jewish leaders on Psalms 105 & 106; their structure was woven inextricably into his thought. When we are obedient to the Holy Spirit, Scripture – and Psalms in particular – structures our thinking.

6.4 History as ontology: the repetitions

Repetitions were already covered briefly in §4.7: in this section we go deeper into the details.

Pss.14 and 53 are almost identical; Ps.144 quotes both Pss.8 and 18; Ps.70 quotes Ps.40; Ps.60 is quoted by both Ps.44 and Ps.79; Ps.108 quotes both Pss.57 and Pss.60; Ps.68 of course deliberately quotes the Song of Deborah.15 Book IV of Psalms (in particular Ps.96) can be considered as an extensive elaboration of David's song of praise when he brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (1Chron.16)16. And the important Ps.18 is an (almost) exact repetition of 1Sam.22.

These are repetitions of entire verses or stanzas: there are many other clear and deliberate references; for example, "what can man do to me?" (Ps.118:6 = Ps.56:4), or "precious" to the LORD is the blood of his poor/saints (Ps.116:15 = Ps.72:14), or the "shadow of the Almighty" (Pss.91:1; 36:7; 17:8) which itself of course refers back to the Song of Moses at Deut.32:11.

15 Jud.5: Ps.110:3 also uses the important adjective "willing" from Jud.5:9 – see below §9.6
16 By the way, the refrain, "Give thanks to the LORD for he is good / His love endures forever" (Pss.100; 106; 107; 118; and also, tellingly, at Jer.32:12) is also original to 1Chron.16:34.
How are we to read these repetitions? Is it, as scholars have thought in the quite recent past, that the book is poorly edited, with individual poems quite often being more or less random mish-mashes of others? Or is there artistry at a more sophisticated level? Here is Robert Alter (The Book of Psalms, 2007) on Ps.108:

It remains unclear why sections of [Pss.57, 60] should have been spliced together to make the present psalm. Some scholars have speculated, without much evidence, that the composite psalm was intended to serve a new ritual purpose [Kirkpatrick, 1903, follows this line]. It is also distinctly possible that the joining of texts was the result of an inadvertency or confusion in the ancient editorial process.

Alter, by the way, does not believe that the text is the result of confusion. He made his new translation precisely because he thought that the book was full of "great poetry" (as he says in his Introduction), despite the fact that it –

… rarely seeks startling effects, and again and again it deliberately draws on a body of familiar images. … the psalmists, to a large extent composers of liturgical and devotional texts, have no desire to surprise or disorient the pilgrims and supplicants and celebrants for whose use the texts are intended. … the "originality" of the poem inheres in the imaginativeness and freshness with which the poet reworks familiar images. … Ps.91 strikingly illustrates how great poetry can be created out of … stock images.

The first obvious thing to say is on the repetition of Ps.14 as Ps.53. The first is in Book I and the second in Book II. Most scholars are agreed (and I also believe) that the division of Psalms into five Books follows the possession by the ancient editors of distinct collections of psalms, including written scrolls. The concluding verse of Book II (Ps.72:20) is strong evidence for this: "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended". This makes sense as the terminating verse of a scroll, the conclusion of a specific collection of psalms; it hardly makes sense otherwise, since many other David psalms are included in the later Books.

We can therefore confidently infer that the ancient sixth century editors possessed two separate collections of psalms from different sources (Books I and II) each of which contained a version of Ps.14; both of which the ancient editors themselves considered ancient. The fact that they included both, and did not harmonise them in their details (they are not precisely the same) means that the ancient editors treated their sources with respect, preserving not only the individual poems as they had received them, but also the collections entire. They saw their business as gathering together and then transmitting the texts that they had received, with the same attitude also displayed by both Jesus and Paul.

This attitude of the ancient editors is well shown by the old chestnut of an example of the Bible "contradicting itself" beloved of atheists and trotted out for hundreds of years.

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17 Scrolls, not books: remember, books were apparently invented (or at least popularised) by Christians in the first century AD.

18 Paul says, "I passed on to you what I had received", where "received" is the Greek word paralambano "used for formal transmission of tradition in the Hellenistic schools" (Baukham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, 2006, p.264). They had a horror of modifying the texts they had received, which Jesus refers to in Matt.5:18: "jot" and "tittle" are precisely scribal marks!

19 See "A List of Biblical Contradictions" by Jim Meritt (downloaded 12th October 2011) (http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/jim_meritt/bible-contradictions.html). Dr. K.S.A. Khaled (of the Islamic Society, University of Surrey) sent me these references and comments in October 2007 - "A good source of literal Biblical self-contradictions is "Self-Contradictions of the Bible", written by William Henry Burr in 1859 as a response to fundamentalism. It is currently published by Prometheus Books, 700 East Amherst St., Buffalo, NY 14215. Prometheus Books also publishes a large number of
How many stalls and horsemen did Solomon have? 1 Kings 4:26 and 2 Chronicles 9:25 agree that he had twelve thousand horsemen, but Kings says he had "forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots" where Chronicles says he had "four thousand stalls for horses and chariots". Of course, we don't much care how many horses and stalls Solomon had, and it has no theological significance, but details like this are of great historical interest, and they do have a bearing on the accuracy of the text. It is interesting that some LXX manuscripts make the Kings account conform to the Chronicles account, but it seems that the original texts are really inconsistent. I can't find any commentary that believably reconciles these texts from two-and-a-half millennia ago and more. The fact that we can prove that examples can be found of harmonisation in later texts shows that the pure scribal practice was to maintain the received text, inconsistencies and all. There are (at least) two families of sources used by the ancient editors, both of which are faithfully maintained in the scribal tradition, despite the full recognition by the scribes of their inconsistencies, and both of which the ancient editors themselves regarded as ancient.

And Pss. 14 & 53 were both included in Psalms precisely because they were severally in the two ancient scrolls of the collections of David psalms that the ancient editors included in their Books I & II of Psalms. To repeat, where the editors of Psalms (ancient from our perspective) were probably fifth century, the scrolls themselves were ancient even from the perspective of those editors, their text dating from several centuries earlier and the poems themselves largely composed half-a-millennium earlier. The ancient editors did not modify these collections, including both in their entirety: they only added perhaps four psalms to the first collection to complete the present Book I; Book II merges maybe two smaller collections of "David psalms" with the opening collection of the Sons of Korah and some others, including, fittingly, the Royal Psalm of (or for) Solomon to complete the Book.

Another example of the attitude of the ancient editors to their sources is the wonderful passage at Joshua 10 where the sun stands still. Clearly, we cannot today conceive of any way in which the sun can actually stand still, relative to the earth. But note well that the Chronicler could not either, although his understanding of the physics was not as well informed as is ours. Recall David's exclamation "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19) and that the heavens were everywhere understood as the keepers of divine time, as Moses also makes clear at Gen.1:14. Recall too that God's word is reliable and irrevocable: reliable since God always stands by his word, notice Gen.22:16 and the gloss on this of the writer to the Hebrews; and irrevocable since there is no greater than God

books on religious inquiry and biblical critiques, the majority of which have a humanistic/atheistic slant. It contains about 140 textual inconsistencies, classified under "Theological Doctrines", "Moral Precepts", "Historical Facts", and "Speculative Doctrines". The Bible Handbook by W.P. Ball, et al., is available for nine dollars from the American Atheist Press, P.O. Box 2117, Austin TX 78768-2117, and is a collection of biblical contradictions, absurdities, atrocities, immoralities, indecencies, obscenities, unfulfilled prophecies and broken promises. This 372-page volume will give the atheist tons of scriptural ammunition for shooting down the flimsy arguments of the reality impaired. It includes contributions by Mr Foote dated 1900, so we see that this is not a new endeavor."

Pss.1 & 2 to open the whole Book of Psalms, and Pss. 10 & 33 do not have superscriptions and may have also been added to the collection to complete the Book.

Heb.6:13: interestingly, the apostle quotes Gen.22:17, itself an example of the common practice of indirection by the early Christian canonical writers. They quote one verse and intend you to hear the whole passage. The New Testament is an extremely condensed record of apostolic preaching. Remember poor Eutychus (Acts 20:9) who had to listen to Paul droning on for hours? Then look at Paul exclaiming how brief is his letter (Eph.3:3). The writer to the Hebrews also calls his letter "brief" (Heb. 13:22).
to oppose his word.22 We are not able to treat the story literally because we know too much physics, but it is important to realise that the Chronicler also found the story literally unbelievable since the heavens were the timepieces of the God whose word can never be broken; if the law of the King of Babylon “can never be repealed” (Esther1:19; 8:8), how much less the law of God?

So how does the Chronicler treat this unbelievable story? He cites his source! “Is not this [emphatic pronoun] written in the book of Jasher 23?" he says (v.13). Even in the case of the sun standing still for Joshua, which if taken literally would be a glaring inconsistency with everything he knows about the world and its Creator, the text is restrained and credible, since it cites the actual text of the source, which is identified as one otherwise approved as reliable. So the Chronicler (who knows it is weird) carefully (and unusually) gives us all the data, weird and anomalous as it is, and lets us interpret as we wish.

So, coming back to Psalms, I believe that the repetitions we see are a faithful propagation to us by the ancient editors of the various texts they had received. The psalmist of Ps.147 says (v.19f), “[God] has revealed his word to Jacob … He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his ways”, and Moses asks the people, "What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws?" (Deut.4:7f). The psalmist of Ps.67 sings :-

May God be gracious to us and bless us
And make his face to shine upon us
That your ways may be known on earth
Your salvation among all nations.

Selah
Ps.67:1f

For the ancient editors, who they were as the people of God was inextricably linked with the ways of God. And the ways of God were not mere hearsay, but a matter of record and attested by eyewitnesses. Therefore it was of crucial importance that the transmitted text was reliable. Hence the repetitions.

6.5 History as liturgy

Liturgy is a good New Testament word having to do with the service of God. It comes directly from the Greek λειτουργία (leitourgia): “public service, service of the gods, public worship”; and is used frequently in the New Testament as meaning "minister" or "service".24

And of the angels indeed he saith: Who makes his angels spirits and his liturgists [λειτουργος, leitourgous] a flame of fire (Heb.1:7, quoting Ps.104:4, where the word in LXX is identical: λειτουργους). This very important text keys us into the way the Hebrew text was understood by the Greek speakers of the New Testament. Or rather, the way in which they translated their Hebrew understanding of the Greek words they used. It is this same Hebrew word (shareth) which is used at least seven dozen times, largely in the context of Temple worship. Its first use appears to be Ex.24:13 where Joshua is called Moses' "minister", but this occurrence is not translated "liturgist" in the LXX. The next

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22 see 2Sam.23:5; "yet hath he made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure"; see also Ps.132:11, "The LORD sware an oath to David, a sure oath that he will not revoke"; and the pagan parallels in Esther 1:19; 8:8; Dan.6:8,12,15; Job 41:10
23 “Jashur” means ‘the Upright one’. Note that to be "upright" is one of the main characteristics of God: "a faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he" (Deut.32:4). If Jashur is upright, then his text, however surprising, should be thought reliable.
24 Rom.13:6; 15:16,27; Heb 1:7,14; 8:2,6; 9:21; 10:11; Acts 13:2; Phil.2:17,25,30; 2Cor.9:12. This is a very interesting list of references with a wide range of meanings clearly intended by this Greek word “liturgy”. The definition is from the Oxford English Dictionary.
use is in Ex.28:35, where it talks of Aaron's robes of ministry (in LXX: λειτουργεῖν, leitourgein). Notice also that when the writer to the Hebrews here refers to "flame[s] of fire", he is not likely to have the Holy Spirit at Pentecost very far from his mind. The Greek and Hebrew words did not overlap precisely, and the LXX scholars nicely define the meanings for us.

I want to emphasise that there is strong Scriptural support for the idea that although we do not any more know specifically what liturgical practices the Early Church used, there was certainly at least some continuity between Jewish and early Christian practise. The anarchist wing of the Church today would claim that the liturgical practices of the Established Church is ritualist in the sense deprecated by Amos (5:21), but I think that these critics are also missing some Scriptural truth. I think that if modern high Anglicans or Catholics (or Orthodox) time-travelled to a Christian meeting in the first century, there would be some elements of the service they would recognise (just as there would be different elements that modern Anabaptists would recognise).

And one of the important pieces of evidence for this view is here in Ps.136. It is, self-evidently, a liturgical psalm, with the leader singing the verse and the congregation singing the chorus. We know that the early Church used Psalms systematically: they must also have used this psalm, and it is inconceivable to me that the Jews did not teach the Gentiles the Jewish way of doing it. The Gentiles may well have made their own music, but the poem itself is intrinsically antiphonal.

The explicitly liturgical aspect of this psalm is crystal clear: many commentators have seen liturgical elements in many other psalms too. The opening of Ps.118 is one obvious example, as is Ps.24. But the whole Psalter has a liturgical purpose: the people of God are supposed to serve and praise God together, and this is not because God needs to be built up by our praises (a foolish idea!), but because we need to be built up in the knowledge of God. And here "knowledge" refers to knowledge both of the head and of the heart. Psalms is brilliant at integrating our head knowledge and our heart response, and it is this integration that is the ultimate purpose of all liturgy.

"Give thanks to the LORD for he is good, his kindness [and steadfast faithfulness] is forever" (Ps.136:1) directly quotes David's song of praise in 1Chron.16:34, which is also quoted by Jeremiah (33:12). The psalmist of Ps.118 also begins and ends his psalm with this verse; Book V opens with it (Ps.107:1) and Book IV closes with it (Ps.106:1).26

"And shook Pharaoh and his force into the Reed Sea" (Ps.136:15). Shook is an unusual and vivid word which is directly quoting Ex.14:27. We will treat the covenantal aspect of this explicitly in detail below (in §6.7), but this emphasises that the psalms cannot be pigeonholed; they all have elements in greater or lesser measure of all of: doxology, liturgy, covenant affirmation, lament, confidence in God, and looking to the coming of the King, the final return from exile and the apocalyptic judgement.

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25 We must praise God wholeheartedly (Pss.9:1; 111:1; 119:2, 10, 34, 58, 69, 145; 138:1).
26 Note that the Chronicler was clearly exilic, since he has appended the doxology concluding Ps.106 to David's Psalm in 1Chron.16 ("save us, and gather us from the nations"), and that this chorus is used by Jeremiah in the context of the beautiful chapter promising restoration, and also note that Ethan the Ezrahite is referencing this prophesy of Jeremiah when he when he speaks of "David my servant" (Ps.89:20, cp. Jer.33:21,22,26 and Ez.34:23,24; 37:24).
27 Robert Alter's comment. Used otherwise in Scripture only at Jud.16:20; Neh.5:13; Job 38:13; Ps.109:23; Is.33:9,15; 52:2; Jer.51:38. Notice that the usage in Ps.109 is not looking back to Exodus: David seems unaware of the Exodus story as told in the text we have. A similar comment can be made about the usage in Judges. These two passages support the hypothesis of the finalisation of the present text of the Torah some time after the establishment of the Northern kingdom.
We have seen how the Psalmists recite the history of the children of Israel in what might be thought a formulaic way, and how the New Testament echoes this treatment. We have seen above, and in other places, how the Psalmists are keen to remember, and again this attitude is widespread in the Scriptures. History is ontological. If you do not know your history you do not know who you are: it is central to the Gospel. And in this psalm we have an explicitly congregational recitation by the Jews of their history.

This history has a doxological element (Ps.136:1-4), a cosmic element (vv.5-9), a covenantal element (vv.10-15), and a political element (vv.16-25). The psalm includes mention of God's primacy and cosmic power as Creator, God's impossibilities (see §3), the land as an inheritance, and the liberty and security of the children of God. It is about the power of the King (God's power over Pharaoh, and over Sihon and Og, and indeed also over the sun and the moon which were objects of worship to the surrounding nations); but it does not mention Judgement and Justice which are the defining Kingly characteristics and are otherwise a strong feature of Psalms, and which we will discuss at length in §9.8.

We, who include the lowest of all, are the people of God, the highest of all. We remember God's works and his wonders in the past, and he "remembers us in our low estate" (Ps.136:23). In this liturgy we place ourselves in time in relation to God: we are aware of the action of God in the past right back to the beginning, and we are aware of the promise of God all the way to the end; this is why Jesus calls himself the Alpha and Omega. When we are down he knows, and it is not his intention to leave us down. We are not insignificant pieces of flotsam tossed this way and that by the turbulent waves, by the forces of chaos; we are the children of the God who by his understanding made the heavens, the God who has determined an inheritance for us, the God who has found a way to free us from our enemies. And it is by his unfailing love that he sustains his creation.

## 6.6 History as lament

We will discuss Lament in Psalms at length in the next Chapter, but a chapter on the History psalms would not be complete without consideration of Ps.78 and its adjoining companions Pss. 77 & 79 in the "Asaph" collection in Book III of Psalms. There is internal evidence that these three Psalms are by three different Asaphs. Perhaps Ps.77 is by David's Asaph while they were in the wilderness fleeing Saul, but I prefer to place it at the time of Absalom's rebellion around 1000BC. On the other hand it is clear that Ps.79 refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586BC ("they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble", v.1).

Ps.78 seems to be from the time of Hezekiah since the last part ("he beat back his enemies", v.66) appears to refer to the destruction of the army of Sennacherib about 710BC, and where the "David" of vv.70, 72 is a cipher for Hezekiah himself. This reading is supported (and suggested) by the appellation of God, "the Holy One of Israel" (v.41) which is characteristic of Isaiah (see §5.5).

He ended the days [of the men of Ephraim] in futility and their years in terror

Ps.78:33 [& v.9]

The Northern Kingdom was regularly called "Ephraim" in synecdoche, and although the actual text here refers to the wilderness time with Moses (with "Ephraim" this time a synecdoche for "Israel", alluding to the foundational story of Joseph, who was a prince in

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Egypt just as Moses was), Asaph is evoking the memory of the destruction of Samaria only a few years earlier in 722BC. This is made explicit later in the psalm:

He rejected the tents of Joseph, he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim
but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion [Jerusalem] which he loved

Ps78.67f

All the explicit historical references in Ps.78 are to the times of the exodus, the wandering in the wilderness, the Conquest and the reign of Saul, the first King of Israel (v.61). The psalmist's perspective is very long, nearly a millennium. Today, we restrict ourselves to ancient history to avoid political controversy, but I think that the motivation of this psalmist was different when he referred to ancient history and only alluded to recent events. It is the long perspective we need as people of God: we need to see the cosmic significance of things, with God's eyes.

The purposes of God after all are "from before the foundation of the world" (John 17:4; Eph.1:4; 1Pet.1:20)! Jesus upbraided the Pharisees and Sadducees for being unable to read the "signs of the times" (Matt.16:3): these were the political and spiritual leaders of Israel who were supposed to be able to interpret the current political situation. The Sadducees were the Machiavellian collaborators with the Romans, who looked at politics rather cynically: they were wealthy and keen to protect their position, rather like the wealthy of today. The Pharisees on the other hand were the spiritual firebrands who thought of themselves as picking up the mantle of the prophets; we are starting to get to know them much better through the Dead Sea Scrolls.

In this reading of Ps.78 and its companions, there is a distinct progression from the near-destruction of David's kingdom in Absalom's rebellion c.1000BC (Ps.77), to the destruction of Ephraim (Samaria) by the Assyrians in 722BC (Ps.78), to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586BC (Ps.79). It is a lament sandwich, with an historical filling. A lament sandwich?

Will the LORD reject forever? Ps.77:7

is echoed by :-

How long, O LORD? Wilt thou be angry forever? Ps.79:5

David's Asaph in Ps.77 is prophesying David's lament recorded by the Chronicler :-

O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! …
O Absalom, my son, my son! 2Sam.18:33

and Jeremiah's Asaph in Ps.79 takes up David's laments recorded in Book I of Psalms :-

How long, O LORD? Pss.6:3; 13:1f; 35:17

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6.7 History as Covenant

Covenant permeates the whole Bible. It is there at the beginning where the heart of God is revealed – not in some legal contract mind you, but in that most personal of relationships, marriage itself:

The twain shall be one flesh

Gen.2:24

It is the same covenant relationship in view at the end of the book where the final purposes of God are revealed:

… Jerusalem … a bride beautifully dressed for her husband

Rev.21:2

The same was recognised by Solomon:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth

Song 1:2

All the treasure, princess, is pearls

Filigree of gold her raiment

In embroidered stuff she is led to the King

Ps.45:13f

It is there in the prophets:

Your Maker is your Husband

Is.54:5

As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee

Is.62:5

I was an husband to them

Jer.31:3

… when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine

Ez.16:8

Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD … In that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘my husband’

Hos.1:2; 2:16

And incidentally, in the passage above Ezekiel is looking back to the Chronicler, making explicit what the Chronicler treated only implicitly. We read Ruth as a love story, and so it is, but we should also remember that Biblically – from the Chronicler’s point of view – it is yet another story about Covenant:

I am Ruth, thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman. … Boaz begat Obed, and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David

Ruth 3:9; 4:21f

John Baptist recognised it:

I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.

John 3:29

and Paul comments on it:

So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

Eph.5:32

30 Amended slightly from Robert Alter’s translation (following his footnote): he takes a syntactical oddity of the text to suggest a very slight emendation. This wording follows the Hebrew but sounds strange in English since it does not match voices: “princess” is vocative, but the subsequent lines use third person pronouns.

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Jesus himself told a pointed Wedding parable, which the Pharisees understood perfectly well was against them. I give this whole story, since it is so tightly told that I can't cut it anywhere without losing some of my point:-

The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.

Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.

And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.

Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk.

Matt.22:2-15

and Jesus also explicitly (and emphatically) calls himself "Bridegroom" :-

Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.

Matt.9:15; Mark 2:19; Luke 5:34

For Christians, marriage is the present physical symbol of the original cosmic covenant of God with his people, for which the Mosaic Law is an allegory. For the Jews, marriage became an extended allegory for the Law in the prophesy of Hosea, and Jeremiah continued this as an extended metaphor. It is because it was recognised as such an allegory, and because this reading was supported by the Psalmist of Ps.45, that Solomon's Song was accepted in the canon of Scripture. But for both Jews and Christian, covenant is a cosmic reality!

When Jesus tells his kingdom of heaven story about the wedding feast all his hearers understood that he was talking about Covenant: when he talked about burning up their city he intended them to hear echoes of Isaiah. Jeremiah and the other prophets speaking about the destruction of Jerusalem: he was looking forward a generation to the new destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70. And when he spoke about the bridegroom, he intended them to hear echoes of Hosea and the other prophets speaking about Covenant and the judgement of God.

Covenant is rooted in history. Stephen's speech, discussed above in §6.3, is really all about Covenant, although I did not emphasise that point as such then; indeed, this whole chapter so far has been implicitly about Covenant, and Covenant will obtrude one way and another throughout the rest of the book. I want to conclude this chapter by reading two important psalms with an especial emphasis on how the psalmists treated covenant historically, and history covenantally. Psalm 18 is one of the earliest psalms, from a David collection, and Psalm 107 is one of the latest ones, probably added by the ancient

31 And because Song had an Hebrew text! Where there was no Hebrew (or Aramaic) text (as for the extra chapters of Daniel for example) the book was not accepted. Maccabees for example had only a Greek text. The Masoretic scholars had a strict view of evidence, and of the chain of evidence. They wanted to be sure, to "certainly know" (Gen.43:7), that their text was good, that it was not just thoughts about the events from some later time by people who themselves had no direct experience of the events, who were not eyewitnesses, but was itself an authoritative account, supported by eyewitness testimony.
godly editors of the book. Neither are explicitly historical, but both rest on a close reading of history, and both are essentially covenantal.

**Psalm 107:** This opening psalm of the last Book of Psalms is a meditation on the history of Israel, and an invitation to the "wise" to think about them, and "consider the great love of the LORD" (v.43). Love bespeaks relationship, and is the precondition for Covenant. The first mention of "love" in the Scriptures is God's description of Abraham's relationship to Isaac (Gen.22:2); but the first mention of God's "love" for us is not until Deuteronomy, where Moses tells the people that God "loved thy fathers" (Deut.4:37). This is in the context of the great second rehearsal of the Covenant for which the book is named in English:

> Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. Deut.4:2

Compare the restraint of this passage with the extraordinary intensity of Ezekiel weeping over Jerusalem:

> And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live.

> I have caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field, and thou hast increased and waxen great, and thou art come to excellent ornaments: thy breasts are fashioned, and thine hair is grown, whereas thou wast naked and bare. Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee [remember Ruth & Boaz!], and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the LORD God, and thou becamest mine.

> Then washed I thee with water; yea, I throughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil. I clothed thee also with brodered work, and shod thee with badgers' skin, and I girded thee about with fine linen, and I covered thee with silk. I decked thee also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck. And I put a jewel on thy forehead, and ear rings in thy ears, and a beautiful crown upon thine head. Ez.16:6-12

God not only loves us, he loves us with the fierce love of an husband; and the Covenant is in the love, not only in the mere Law! I am convinced that Ps.107 is late, one of the latest psalms. It may be that the ancient editors of the book wrote some psalms especially to complete the collection: it seems clear to me that Pss.1 & 150 are in this category, and I think Ps.107 is too. Thus, I would say that the psalmist of Ps.107 is alluding to the Ezekiel passage (among many others) when he speaks of the lovingkindness of God.

And in this psalm the lovingkindness of God, rendered elei by the LXX translators, is in the opening, the closing; and in the refrain which occurs three times, breaking the psalm into four parts:

> O give thanks unto the LORD, for he is good [ελεος, eleos]
> for his mercy endureth for ever …

> Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness [ελεη, elei]
> and for his wonderful works [θαυμασια, thaumasia] to the children of men! …

> Whoso is wise, and will observe these things
> even they shall understand the lovingkindness [ελεη, elei] of the LORD.

Ps.107:1, 8, 21, 31, 43

"Wonderful works", rendered thaumasia by the LXX translators, is the same word used in Matt.21:15 ("wonder"), with the related thaumastos ("marvel") used many times.

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32 see Matt.9:27 for ελησον, eleison, as in Kyrie eleison ("Lord, have mercy", an important part of Christian liturgy)

33 marvel: Mk.5:20; John 3:7; 5:20; 5:28; 7:21; Acts 3:12; marvell: Matt.9:8,33; 21:20; Acts 2:7. The words are used more extensively than this: I have only cited the passages referring to "wonderful works" in the Old Testament sense. It is notable that Luke, a native Greek speaker, uses these words
including the direct reference to Ps.107:29 (he stilled the storm to a whisper) in Matt.8:27 (and parallels in Mark 4:39; Luke 8:24), and Jesus’ direct quote from Ps.118:

The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone

The LORD has done this and it is marvellous in our eyes

Ps.118:22f; Matt.21:42; Mk.12:11

Ps.107 has four episodes separated by the refrain. The first clearly refers poetically to the Exodus (wandered in desert wastelands); the second (prisoners in iron chains) perhaps alludes to Manasseh (2Chron.33:11f, although this text says specifically "bronze" shackles), or perhaps it alludes to Deborah :-

And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD: for [Jabin king of Canaan] had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel”

Jud.4:3

It seems also to be referring to the Captivity in Egypt since the texts speak of Egypt as being the land of iron chains, so this passage has an historical intent even if there is no clear specific referent :-

But the LORD hath taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, even out of Egypt, to be unto him a people of inheritance, as ye are this day.

Deut.4:20; cp. 1Kings 8:51

The obvious referent of the third episode is Jonah, but only from the point of view of Jonah's shipmates! But there was a long tradition in Israel of knowledge of shipfaring – right from the time of Noah, who caulked his ship with pitch (Gen.6:14). Israel prophesied that Zebulun was to be "an haven for ships" (Gen.49:13), and Deborah upbraided Dan for remaining "in ships" (Jud.5:17). Solomon had a merchant navy (1Kings 9:26) which traded extensively (2Chron.8:18; 9:21) practical memory of this survived for at least a century in the southern kingdom since good king Jehoshaphat built another trading fleet with (presumably) financial help from the northern kingdom (1Kings 22:48f; 2Chron.20:36f). The "ships of Tarshish" (clearly associated with Tyre by Isaiah, 23:1) were proverbial in Israel: as were the perils of the sea – see Psalm 48:7 for a reference (by the Sons of Korah) to them being "shattered by an east wind". David's singers use a sort of anti-synecdoche for the same idea as the much later Psalmist of Ps.107 :-

There go the ships
there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein.

Ps.104:26

Leviathan is the most terrifying of monsters, but God enjoys his "frolicking" (as the NIV very helpfully translates it). "Leviathan" stands for primal power, subject only to God; the turbulent sea is another such primal power, and mentions of the "sea" (Ex.14:27) or the "deep" (Gen.1:2) or "waves and breakers" (Jonah 2:3; Ps.42:7) are all referring to this. Note well that there will be "no sea" in the new heaven and new earth (Rev.21:1), specifically because there will be rest on the eighth day.

much more colloquially: he uses different words to refer to miracles (I suspect that the usages in Acts keep the wording of the traditional accounts of these things, which would have been originally also in Greek, with a heavy Jewish accent: the traditional accounts of the Gospels would have been almost entirely in Aramaic which Luke himself would have translated). Curiously, John appears to follow Luke's usage. It is entirely possible that many Galileans (including John) were bilingual in Greek.

34 Even if the Exodus, however it is dated, was apparently prior to the Iron Age, usually dated to 1300BC at the earliest

35 the mention of "ivory, apes and peacocks" here suggests an Asian Tarshish (India?) rather than a Mediterranean one (Carthage?)

36 The Chroniclers of Kings and Chronicles have rather different slants on this, but the bottom line was that the ships were wrecked, and naval activities then apparently ceased. There is no further mention of a merchant navy for the southern kingdom, and the texts suggest that the northern kingdom never had one.
The psalmist of 107 is making the same point as the psalmist of 104:

He stilled the storm to a whisper
The waves of the sea were hushed
Ps.107:29 (cp. Matt.8:27; Mk.4:39; Lk.8:24)

– God has power over the sea (and Jesus calming the storm, mentioned by all three synoptic Evangelists, is a reference to this verse!) – but the psalmist is going further since his purpose is to show the possibility of confidence in God in the face of the greatest perils:

They were glad when it grew calm
And he guided them to their desired haven
Ps.107:30

The final episode of the psalm is a thumbnail sketch of the whole history of the people of Israel from Abraham to the Babylonian exile. He refers to Sodom & Gomorrah, the 40 years in the wilderness, David taking Jerusalem, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, and the prospering of the Jews in Babylon (see Esther 10:3; Dan.6:25ff etc). God has promised to love his people through thick and thin, and the promise of God is reliable!

Psalm 18: In David's case, the history was not for reading in books but was lived personally (and considered important enough by the Chronicler to record twice!)

David spoke to the L ORD the words of this song on the day the L ORD saved him from the grasp of all
his enemies and from the hand of Saul"
Ps.18:0 (superscription) and 2 Sam.22:1

Covenant is implicit in the whole psalm, and is underlined in 2 Samuel by the immediate addition of "the last words of David" (2 Sam. 23:1), where he says:

Is not my house right with God?
Hath he not made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part?
Will he not bring to fruition my salvation
and grant me my every desire?
2 Sam. 23: 5

but the Covenant is also explicit both in the psalm ("laws", "statutes") and in the final verse ("keeping faith" and "seed":)

His laws were before me, from his statutes I did not swerve …
He is a tower of rescues to his king
keeping faith with his anointed
For David and his seed forever
Ps.18: 23, 50 (transl. Robert Alter)37

A note on Alter's "keeping faith" is warranted. The AV has "sheweth mercy [or lovingkindness]", and NIV has (more helpfully) "shows unfailing kindness". We tend to slide over this word, but certainly for David it was heavy with meaning and we should instead dwell on it. The word is used over a hundred times in Psalms alone, including in the refrain of Psalm 136 "his mercy endureth forever" which we have already discussed (§6.5) and which originated with David (1 Chron.16:34). I think Alter has got it right.

The very first verse of the psalm (omitted in 2 Samuel), "I will love thee, O L ORD my strength" (Ps.18:1) uses a word which Robert Alter translates, "I am impassioned of thee", and Kirkpatrick comments: "a word occurring nowhere else in this form, and denoting tender and intimate affection". Covenant for David is a relationship: God responds to him, and he responds to God. David, "the sweet singer of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1), brought a new personal intensity to faith that is only foreshadowed obliquely: perhaps in Jacob wrestling with God (Gen.32), perhaps in the intensity of Joseph's dealings with his family

37 2 Samuel reads "tower" with the same consonantal text and Alter (who follows the vocalisation of the Masoretic text) comments that the 2 Sam. reading echoes the imagery of the psalm. Interestingly, even Alter allows that "it is conceivable" that David himself composed this psalm.
(weeping is mentioned no less than five times\(^{38}\), perhaps in the heart response of Miriam the prophetess (Ex.15:21) or of Hannah (1 Sam. 1:10; 2:1). David is never called a "prophet" in the Hebrew texts as the earliest psalmists Miriam and Moses are. In a way, this psalm of David echoes Deborah's (Jud. 5) and Hannah's (1 Sam. 2) psalms of triumph, but neither of them have his personal intensity.

But it is because Ps.18 looks back to, and is formally similar to, the previous psalms of triumph (Moses: Ex. 15; Deborah: Jud. 5; Hannah: 1 Sam: 2), and in particular the fact that Mary looks back to these psalms when she composes the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46ff), that I am treating it as an *historical* psalm. All five are covenant psalms rooted in personal experience, which then are knitted into the historical narrative of Israel. All five have an overarching narrative, that God is strong, he is a warrior: God is King of kings or God of gods; there is terrible danger of cosmic scope but God has unfailing love towards us, he rescues us from the danger and makes us live in peace and security, according to his covenant!

I have taken these (mostly) in the order Mary gives them in her very brief psalm, although she has to be read listening to Moses, David, and particularly Hannah, whom she even quotes. So when she speaks of "mighty deeds" and the "Mighty One" she is alluding to all the martial and cosmic images of Moses and David, to all God's "wonderful works" (see §3, on God's impossibilities, to adequately expand this idea), and when she rejoices in her "Saviour" she is remembering Joshua and Moses, and the words of Gabriel.

**God is strong**, stronger than the mountains, and a horse's strength was proverbial (Pss.147:10; 33:17; Job 39:19).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The earth trembled and quaked and the foundations of the mountains shook} & \quad \text{Ps.18: 7 (David)} \\
\text{They trembled because he was angry} & \quad \text{Ex.15:1, 21 (Moses)} \\
\text{The mountains quaked before the LORD, The One of Sinai} & \quad \text{Jud.5:5 (Deborah)} \\
\text{Before the LORD, the God of Israel} & \quad \text{1Sam.2:1,6 (Hannah)} \\
\text{My heart rejoices in the LORD} & \quad \text{Luke 1:46f (Mary)} \\
\text{In the LORD my horn is lifted up …} & \quad \text{O L ORD … you marched from the land of Edom} \\
\text{The LORD brings death and makes alive} & \quad \text{Ex.15: 3 (Moses)} \\
\text{My soul doth magnify the Lord} & \quad \text{Jud.5:5 (Deborah)} \\
\text{And my spirit rejoiceth in God my Saviour} & \quad \text{Ps.18: 14, 30, 32, 34f, 39 (David)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

**God is a warrior**, quoting Moses: the martial imagery is explicit for Deborah and David as expected, but, surprisingly, for Hannah and Mary too! It is because they had deliverance at the front of their minds that they use this imagery (as well as being steeped in the Scriptures!).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{He shot his arrows and scattered …} & \quad \text{He trains my hands for battle …} \\
\text{As for God … he is a shield …} & \quad \text{You give me your shield of victory …} \\
\text{It is God who arms me with strength …} & \quad \text{You armed me with strength for battle} \\
\text{He trains my hands for battle …} & \quad \text{Ps.18: 14, 30, 32, 34f, 39 (David)} \\
\text{You give me your shield of victory …} & \quad \text{Ex.15: 3 (Moses)} \\
\text{You armed me with strength for battle} & \quad \text{Jud.5:5 (Deborah)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{38}\) Gen. 42:24; 43:30; 45:2, 15; 46:29
The Lord is a God who knows …
   The bows of the warriors are broken
   He has done mighty deeds with his arm
   ISam.2:3f (Hannah)
   Luke 1:51 (Mary)

**God is King of kings and God of gods:** Both David and Hannah quote Moses, but Deborah and Mary only refer obliquely to God as *King of kings*, although Mary implicitly has "God of gods" in mind even where she (with Deborah) only suggests "King of kings" :-

- Who is God besides the Lord?  
  Ps.18:31 (David)
- Who among the gods is like you, O Lord?  
  Ex.15:11 (Moses)
- Hear this you kings
  - Listen you rulers …
  - Kings came, they fought
  - The kings of Canaan fought …
    - But they carried off no silver, no plunder
  Jud.5:3, 19 (Deborah)
- There is no one holy like the Lord …
  - There is no Rock like our God
  1Sam.2:2 (Hannah)
- He hath put down rulers from their seats
  Luke 1:52 (Mary)

**There is terrible cosmic danger.** All five psalmists have a cosmic viewpoint, with God the Maker of heaven and earth, and fully in charge of all the power in the universe. We should emphasise that a "cherub" is not a chubby-faced cute little angel; as Robert Alter explains: "the cherub is a fierce-winged beast, the charger ridden by the sky-god in Canaanite mythology, not the dimpled darling of Renaissance painting"! And "waters" in this sort of context always invoke the primæval chaos that God banishes at Creation. Jewish thought is not dualistic (like Canaanite thought). Chaos and order do not fight at Creation: God speaks and chaos flees.

- The cords of the grave coiled around me …
- He parted the heavens and came down …
  - He mounted the cherub and flew …
  - He soared on the wings of the wind …
  - He reached down from on high and took hold of me
    - He drew me out of deep waters
    Ps.18:5, 9f, 16 (David)
- The deep waters covered them
  - They sank to the depths like a stone …
  - By the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up
    - the surging waters stood firm like a wall
    - the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea …
  - You blew with your breath and the sea covered them
    - They sank like lead in the mighty waters
    Ex.15:5, 8, 10 (Moses)
- O Lord, when you went out from Seir …
  - The earth shook, the heavens poured
    - The heaven poured down water …
  Jud.5:4, 20 (Deborah)
- From the heavens the stars fought
  - from their courses they fought against Sisera
  1Sam.2:8, 10 (Hannah)
- The foundations of the earth are the Lord's
  - Upon them he has set the world …
  Luke 1:49 (Mary)
God's love never fails:  he cares for the poor and needy whom all the temporal powers ignore or despise;  in the Greek, Mary is quoting David, who is quoting Moses ("shewing mercy [LXX = ἐλεος, eleos] unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments", Ex.20:6). Deborah here takes a completely different line, with her idea of "willing volunteers" being picked up later by David in Ps.110:3 "Your troops will be willing on your day of battle" (Robert Alter notes the lexical relation of these two passages). Deborah's reference to the "righteous acts of the LORD" is what I am interpreting as an oblique reference to God's unfailing love. David knew this psalm of Deborah's, quoting from it extensively in Ps.68.

He shows unfailing kindness to his anointed
[LXX = ἐλεος το χριστω αυτου, eleos to Christos auton] Ps.18:50 (David)

In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed Ex.15: 13 (Moses)

My heart is with Israel's princes
With the willing volunteers among the people
Praise the LORD! Jud.5:9ff (Deborah)

Consider the voice of the singers at the watering places
They recite the righteous acts of the LORD

He raises the poor from the dust
And lifts the needy from the ash heap 1Sam.2:8 (Hannah)

His mercy [ἐλεος, eleos] extends to those who fear him
From generation to generation Luke 1:50 (Mary)

He rescues us:

You have delivered me from the attacks of the people …
He is the God who saves me from my enemies Ps.18:43, 47f (David)

Who is like you
Majestic in holiness
Awesome in glory
Working wonders?

You stretched out your right hand
And the earth swallowed them Ex.15:11f (Moses)

So may all your enemies perish, O LORD Jud.5:31 (Deborah)

I delight in your deliverance 1Sam.2:1 (Hannah)

He has done mighty deeds with his arm …
He has lifted up the humble Luke 1:51f (Mary)

He makes us live in peace and security:

You have made me the head of nations
People I did not know are subject to me …

The LORD lives, and praise be to my Rock …
Who subdues nations under me Ps.18: 43, 46f (David)

In your strength you will guide [the people you have redeemed] to your holy dwelling
You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance

The place O LORD you made for your dwelling
The sanctuary O LORD your hands have established Ex.15:13, 17 (Moses)

May they who love you be like the sun
When it rises in its strength Jud.5:31 (Deborah)

Those who were hungry hunger no more
She who was barren has borne seven children 1Sam.2:5 (Hannah)

He has filled the hungry with good things Luke 1:53 (Mary)
He remembers his covenant. David knows that he is not "sinless", but because he "trusted God who justifies the ungodly, [his] faith [was] credited [to him] as righteousness", as Paul comments on this important passage (Rom.4:5): wash me, David says, and I shall be whiter than snow (Ps.51:7). And why did Deborah "arise"? She was a prophet and a judge of Israel, and she knew that God had raised her up. Her "arising" was God's work according to his covenant, and this is clear, if implicit, in the text. Who is telling her to "Wake up!" if not the Spirit of God? And why "break out into song" if she was not, as David put it later, letting her heart "rejoice" (1Chron.16:10), that is, "rejoicing in the LORD" (Phil.3:1; 4:4, 10; Ps.97:1)?

The LORD has dealt with me according to his righteousness …
For I have kept the ways of the LORD …
All his laws are before me …
I have been blameless before him …
The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness …
He gives his King great victories
He shows unfailing kindness to his anointed
To David and his seed forever
Ps.18: 20-24, 50 (David)

The LORD is my strength and my song
He has become my salvation
Ex.15:2 (Moses)

I Deborah arose
Arose a mother in Israel …
Wake up, wake up Deborah
Wake up, wake up, break out in song!
Arise O Barak!
Take captive your captives, O son of Abinoam
Most blessed of women be Jael …
Most blessed of tent-living women
Jud.5:7, 12, 24 (Deborah)

He will give strength to his King
And exalt the horn of his anointed [LXX = χριστου, christou]
1Sam.2:10 (Hannah)

He has helped his servant Israel
Remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his seed forever
Even as he said to our fathers
Luke 1:54 (Mary)

This section, on History as Covenant, is very long because it is centrally important to underline the systematic nature of the references of the psalmists to their history, and the embedding of this history in the thought of Jews right up to the first century. We quote from Mary's Magnificat, but we could just as easily have cited texts from the approximately contemporary Dead Sea Scrolls.

We considered David's Ps.18 (c.1000BC) and the post-exilic Ps.107 (probably c.444BC); we started by tracing the extravagant language of marriage used by the prophets to underline God's commitment (his covenant) to his people but clearly originating with Moses, and we continued by sketching God's attitude insisted on by the psalmists. This is (to summarise): God is strong, God is a warrior, God is King of kings and God of gods, there is terrible cosmic danger, God's love never fails, he rescues us, he makes us live in peace and security, he remembers his covenant! Again and again they return to these themes, and they always have God's historical reliability in view as they urge us to hope in his covenant love.
The lament psalms and the faithfulness of God

This book is about an historical reading of Psalms, and history is largely the record of bad things happening. Anyone who reflects seriously on history must sooner or later lapse into lamentations, as we have seen. So in this Chapter we take as a starting point four of the psalms of lamentation (Pss.137, 88, 89, 22) to explore in more detail how the psalmists confront the most painful things.

The psalmist plumbs the bitterness of exile in Ps.137. Is grief formless? We often feel that it is, and we are reduced to silence in response. Do we weep wordlessly? But we will see the poet skilfully channelling his grief to compose a song about not being able to sing in a foreign land (Ps.137:4)!

Again, the psalmist, Heman the Ezrahite, feels that he is repulsive to his closest friends (Ps.88:8) – what deep depression is this? But the response of the psalmist is: day and night I cry out to thee (Ps.88:1)!

The psalm that follows Heman's complaint is Ps.89, Ethan's lament over the failure of the Covenant. He cries to God, "How long Lord? ... How long?" (Ps.89:46). Jerusalem lies in ruins, burying the hope of Israel. Nevertheless, Ethan refuses to relinquish his grasp on his hope in the manifestly impossible promise of God. Covenant makes sense of history, and if Covenant is only illusion then are we plunged into chaos and meaninglessness. But incredibly, the psalmists do not lose hope.

More than that, not only do they not lose hope, they assert triumph even in the very jaws of death, as we will show that Jesus did when he quoted Ps.22 on the cross. The lamentation of the psalmists confronts us with their settled determination to grasp the hand of the God that saves, the God that does impossibilities, the God who remains faithful to his promises.

Our hearts' cry in times of darkness

I do not understand why the vast majority of the hymns and songs of the English church today are in the major key. Do we go to church to forget the news? In this English generation we live in unprecedented comfort; a comfort that is unprecedented historically, and it must be said, also unusual in our present world.

Everyone knows this of course, however much we try to suppress the knowledge, and everyone also knows that we all have personal difficulties of one sort or another, more or less severe. But the stiff upper lip must be maintained, appearances must be kept up; one doesn't want to make too much fuss! It is polite to seem happy.

The psalmists emphatically did not take this view. They were interested in "real reality", as Francis Schaeffer used to put it. The psalms have been sung for the last three millennia wherever there have been Jews or Christians specifically because they are emotionally unrestrained, as well as being very accessible. In times of darkness we need words to express our feelings. Psalms gives us these words.

So much is obvious. But in this chapter I want to dig down and explore some of the depths that the psalmists have pioneered. Their purpose is not simply to express their feelings – they also want to guide their feelings. We are not in a trackless waste of despair, even though there are many circumstances where this description seems the only one available.

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1 F.A.Schaeffer, Escape from Reason (1968)
What is to be done in the face of disaster, whether it is a private collapse or a public catastrophe? The response of both the prophets and the psalmists sometimes verges on the unhinged, but in any case they do not minimise events: they do not say, "there there darling, it'll be all right in the morning"!

This refusal to minimise is there in the ninth century text about the "great lady of Shunem" (2Kings 4:8) who, beyond expectation, was given a child, but later carried news of his death to Elisha:

The child grew … "My head! my head!" he said to his father. His father told a servant, Carry him to his mother. After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, then he died. …

She called her husband and said. Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so that I can go to the man of God quickly and return. Why go to him today? he asked. It is not the New Moon or the sabbath!

It's all right, she said. … So she set out, and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, Look! There's the Shunamite! Run to meet her and ask her, Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?

Everything is all right, she said.

When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me why.

Did I ask you for a son, my lord? she said. Didn't I tell you, Don't raise my hopes? 2Kings 4:18-37

If it really was "all right" she would have sat at home and buried her son quietly. Her husband was ready to do that, shrugging his shoulders – what else was to be done? But she refused to quell and silence her "bitter distress", she insisted on confronting Elisha with the death of her hope.

And this is what the psalmists also teach us to do. We are to run to the Lord, and when we reach him we are to grasp his feet and pour out the bitter complaints of our hearts. The world may collapse into meaninglessness – into anomie – but we are not to relinquish our grasp of our hope in the impossible promises of God. There are tremendous resources in this wonderful book, if only we could appreciate them.

In the following sections we consider four psalms at some length, but we could have selected others:

I am worn out from my groaning.
All night long I flood my bed with weeping …
… the LORD has heard my weeping. Ps.6:6f
Mine enemies would daily swallow me up
for they be many that fight against me, O thou most High …
Thou tellest my wanderings
put thou my tears into thy bottle Ps.56:2,8
… I am like a wineskin in the smoke Ps.119:83

2 The NIV is accurate here: "all right" renders shalom each of the five times it appears.
7.2 *Bitter tears*

The lament psalms offer important resources for Christian faith and ministry, even though they have been largely purged from the life and liturgy of the church. Such purging attests to the alienation between the Bible and the church … Walter Brueggemann, *The Formfulness of Grief*.

Walter Brueggemann is here concerned to show how the Biblical form of the Lament psalms is giving us words where we feel silenced by grief. We have been formed by God at the beginning, and when we are undone by circumstances we can again - contrary to expectation! – be reformed by him:

> The [lament] form moves on from *Fear not, for I am with you* [Gen.26:24], to *I will not fear, for you are with me* (Ps.23:4). It is the function of the form (and nothing else will do it) to deal with the elemental, even primordial, fear of anomie⁴, chaos, death, and abandonment. The problem … may indeed be enemies, sickness or death. But such experiences finally concern formlessness, the collapse of categories in which experience can be experienced in a universe of meaning.

W. Brueggemann (*ibid*.; my italics)

The lament is our response to the end of our world: a tragic death or some catastrophe such as the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC; we are tempted to consider such circumstances as unspeakably evil, but the Biblical response is not to be silent (cf. Ps.30:12, … *that my heart may sing to you and not be silent*) but to invoke apocalyptic categories.

Brueggemann comments that :-

> concern about anomie … is centrally about formlessness. [But] the possibility of formfulness endures as a central question. Such formfulness will not be found in universal myths but in communities that have asserted their *historical specificity*. Perhaps it is the task of the theological community to recover confidence in historical specificity, which is a precondition to speech and therefore to liberation.

W. Brueggemann (*ibid*.; my italics)

And so the psalmist laments, and what could be more historically specific than this? – :-

> By the waters of Babylon
> There we sat – oh we wept
> when we remembered Zion …
> How shall we sing the LORD's song
> On foreign soil?  

Ps.137:1, 4 (trans. Alter)

To be simultaneously deprived of song and compelled to sing! – what misery is that?

> On the poplars there
> We hung up our lyres
> For there our captors had asked of us
> words of song
> and our plunderers – rejoicing
> "Sing us from Zion's songs.”

Ps.137:2f (trans. Alter)

Notice that the psalmist uses the word "there" three times, deliberately, together with the word "foreign". He is using these very simple formal means to underline their (literal) alienation: I must necessarily be "here" but I think of "here" as "there"! Who does not recognise this? Again, plunderers renders the Hebrew *tolaleinu*, which Robert Alter says is “anomalous, but is probably a variant form of the familiar term for 'plunderers', 'sholaleinu', perhaps encouraged … by the opportunity for sound play with *talenu*, 'we hung up', at the end of the preceding line”. Note also the ellipsis at rejoicing: the poet words this line as tightly as possible (meaning: "our plunderers ask rejoicing of us")!

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⁴ anomie: OED cites Emile Durkheim's *Suicide*, 1897, and defines it as: *Absence of accepted social standards or values; the state or condition of an individual or society lacking such standards.*
Here is the poet, lamenting, but still paying close attention to the details of his craft! This is the opposite of anomie! We often say "there are no words" – to express this or that experience, but Psalms teaches us that there are always words, if we are willing to let the Spirit whisper to our hearts!

So, as he plucks his instrument the psalmist has also plucked up the courage to start to speak into his wordless misery; what will he say next?

Should I forget you, Jerusalem
may my right hand wither
May my tongue cleave to my palate
if I do not recall you
If I do not set Jerusalem
above my chief joy

Ps.137:5f (transl. Alter)

Alter comments: “The loss of capacity of hand and tongue is linked with the refusal of song, for the right hand is needed to pluck the lyre, and the tongue to sing the song". So the psalmist is compelled to sing, although he doesn’t want to; he turns this around into a gesture of defiance! Jerusalem has been destroyed and ought (rationally) to be forgotten. But he refuses to forget, he refuses to give up hope, and he makes the song that is required of him a token of his hope.

Then we come to the notorious finale :-

Daughter of Babylon the despoiler
happy who pays you back in kind
for what you did to us
Happy who seizes and smashes
your infants against the rock

Ps.137:8f (transl. Alter)

It is anachronistic to complain about the "moral repulsiveness" of this text: everyone in those days hated their enemies! Jesus brought something entirely new into the world when he commanded us to "love your enemies" (Mat.5:44; Luke 6:27, 35; 23:34; Acts 7:60), but that is another story! Unfortunately we would digress too far to explain properly how Jesus' gospel was rooted in and consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures (but cf. §4.5), but some appreciation is essential for understanding these "difficult" passages. Where the psalmists cursed their oppressors, an attitude also documented in the Maccabean rebellion (see the account of the gruesome martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons in 2 Maccabees chapter 7), Jesus instead prayed for them :-

as did also Stephen, who
cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge

This is because of the Resurrection, and because the "elect" are potentially the whole world since anyone, not only the Jews, can be a child of Abraham, by faith (Rom.4:12).

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5 Alter emends the Masoretic text to read "wither"; he says, “The Masoretic text reads 'may my right hand forget [tishkah],’ This is problematic because there is no evidence elsewhere for an intransitive use of the verb 'to forget’ – hence the strategy of desperation of the King James Version in adding, in italics, an object to the verb, ‘its cunning’. But a simple reversal of consonants yields tikhhash, 'wither'.”

6 Alter emends the Masoretic text to read "despoiler"; he says, “The Masoretic text shows hashedudah, 'the despoiled', a reading that can be saved only by an exegetical contortion in which the passive form of the verb is understood to mean 'about to become despoiled.' A simple reversal of consonants, with an adjustment of vocalisation yields hashodeidah, 'the despoiler’.”
This psalm is a resistance song: we are familiar with Shakespeare being played in Bucharest with the audience understanding the text and performance as critical of the authorities, but the censor blissfully unaware of the political danger of a classical text hundreds of years old. This psalm is of that kind; doubtless it had beautiful music – the Jews were renowned in the region for their singing – and the Babylonians couldn't understand the Hebrew!

First we must learn to resist – and resistance of despair is the hardest lesson. Laments are there to give voice where speech is unthinkable. Ululation is not enough, it is wordless and the recourse of pagans: see James' reference to ululation: -

Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl [ολολυζοντες, ululazontes] for your miseries that shall come upon you Jas.5:1

The psalmist teaches us to do just this, to resist despair. His terms are not Christian – when Jesus came he changed the rules – but the lesson is clear. Here is another of God's impossibilities: speaking into our unspeakable misery, he enables us to refuse silence, and to refuse to be silenced.

7.3 Lament as anomie

This is a lament and is to be used as a lament Ez.19:14

So Ezekiel labels his lament for the princes of Israel (v.1), and he concludes it: -

No strong branch is left on it
Fit for a ruler's sceptre Ez.19:14

If there is no rule there is no society! This is the ultimate despair, especially in the context of an Israel that defined herself by her continuing community. We noted above (§7.2 n.3) that a society which loses its grip on its "accepted values" can be said to lapse into anomie.

It is necessary to emphasise that the Scriptures repeatedly express despair in the most graphic terms short of becoming completely unhinged. Awful things happen, and the psalmists and the prophets acknowledge their awfulness: they do not minimise them. So Jeremiah laments: -

Joy has gone from our hearts
Our dancing has turned to mourning
The crown has fallen from our head
Woe to us, for we have sinned Lamentations 5:15f

The crown has fallen from our head: this fulfils the prophecy (Jer.13:18), and remember that this is Judah, and the crown is David's crown. God appears to have revoked his promise to David – no, that is far too weak a statement; God has revoked his promise to David! This is why Brueggemann labelled it anomie (see §7.2) – if God himself goes back on his word what hope is there? Jeremiah concludes with a desperate plea that God will reconsider: -

Turn us to yourself O LORD and we shall be turned
Renew our days as of old
Unless you have utterly rejected us
And are angry with us beyond measure Lamentations 5: 21f

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7 “Richard III” was performed in Bucharest National Theatre in 1976, with Radu Beligan in the title role.
Beyond measure – a black thought that concludes the poem (and the book). Where lies hope in the blackness of our thoughts? Is it there or not? Here the poet has forgotten that hope exists, but if he considers he will remember his previous thought:

"Speak this word to them:
Let my eyes overflow with tears night and day without ceasing
For my virgin daughter – my people – has suffered a grievous wound …"

Have you rejected Judah completely? …
Why have you afflicted us so that we cannot be healed? …
Remember your covenant with us and do not break it …
Our hope is in you

After all, if hope were entirely dead we would not even have strength to lament. Biblically, there are always words, and hope endures.

Hope endures because our God works the impossible – he has no hesitation in breaking his word to us, or rather, in breaking open our limited understanding of what his word entailed; but he is also willing to rend the heavens to bring his purposes to pass! Behind Jeremiah's words lie the words of Isaiah:

O that you had rent the heavens and come down …
For while you did awesome things we did not expect
You had come down: before you mountains trembled!
Since ancient times
No-one has heard
No ear has perceived
No eye has seen any God besides you
Who acts on behalf of those who wait for him
You come to the help of those who gladly do right
Who remember your ways …
But now O LORD, you are our Father …
Do not be angry beyond measure O LORD …
Behold!
Look!
We pray!
We are your people!

Remember his ways! Lament passionately, since passion is also what our Lord Jesus tasted, but in neither hot passion nor cold despair forget that underneath are the everlasting arms (Deut.33:27). The God that can rend the heavens to bring his mercy is also able to turn us towards him. Why does Jeremiah conclude his poem with the plea to God to turn us to yourself? It is specifically because he remembers his previous lament, and God's answer:

Thus says the LORD:
A voice in heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted
because her children are no more
Thus says the LORD:
Restrain your voice from weeping
and your eyes from tears …
There is hope for your future, declares the LORD …

Turn me, and I will be turned
because you are the LORD my God
After I strayed I repented
After I came to understand I beat my breast …
Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight?
My heart yearns for him, declares the LORD …

Return O Virgin Israel
How long will you wander, O unfaithful daughter?
The LORD will create a new thing on earth: a woman will compass a man …

Thus says the LORD:
Only if the heavens above can be measured
And the foundations of the earth below be searched out
Will I reject … Israel …

Declares the LORD

Jer.31:15-20,22,37

In a chapter about anomie this passage in Jeremiah is multiply astonishing. It evokes all the covenants Jeremiah knows; the whole passage is about covenant – the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, and the new covenant that God will bring into being following the terrible catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. Never again (Gen.9:11), God said to Noah, never again! Only if, God says to Jeremiah, (Jer.31:36f), only if everything is destroyed and God shown to be nothing at all! The covenant with Abraham is implicit in the evocation of the patriarchs: Israel & Judah (Jer.31:27) and Ephraim (blessed by Israel, see Gen.48:14 et passim; Jer.31:9,20). The Mosaic covenant is explicit in v.32 which speaks about the Exodus, and is also in view when God says :-

I have loved thee with an everlasting love

Jer.31:3

God here addresses the whole people together as thou (singular), just as in the Aaronic Blessing he addresses the whole congregation with thou :-

The LORD bless thee and keep thee,
the LORD make his face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee,
the LORD lift up his countenance upon thee
and give thee peace

Numbers 6:24ff

The promise to David is remembered when he refers to the heights of Zion (Jer.31:12), and the end of this passage invokes the Creation itself with its implication of the faithfulness of God (compare Jeremiah 31:35 with Genesis 1:14).

Should there not be also an allusion to the Garden of Eden, the primordial controlling story accounting for the very presence in the world of wickedness, the story that sets off all monotheists from the pagans? In fact, a covenant with Adam and Eve is implied when God says to the serpent :-

I will put enmity between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed: he shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel

Genesis 3:15 (note the emphatic pronouns)

and when Jeremiah says: a woman shall compass a man (Jer.31:22) he is pointing to this cosmic story, to the victory over death itself seen earlier by Hosea (13:14) and Isaiah (25:6ff). The word compass (qâbab) is very interesting, first met in the Creation account with the rivers out of Eden compassing the lands (Gen.2:11,13). Paul refers to Gen.3:15 when he says :-

In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman 1Cor.11:11f

And Mary compassed Jesus with no man's intervention, only the Spirit of God's (Lk.1:34f).

Jeremiah's prophecy in this chapter 31 is quite explicit: if the LORD's anger is beyond measure, so also is his lovingkindness. Note also that it is in the central chapter of the book of Job (in which Job declares, I know that my Redeemer lives!) that the poet also takes up the image of the fallen crown (19:9). Biblically, despair is always tempered with hope. Jer.31 is the astonishing chapter where Jeremiah prophesies that they will all know
me [God], because I have put my law in their minds and written it on their hearts! It is in this passage that Jeremiah recalls Hosea and says in the Spirit, I was an husband to them, declares the LORD! Amazingly, God is passionate, literally, about his relationship with us! He is not merely coolly compassionate (as in the Qur’an): on the contrary, he says, I am your husband!

It is emphatically this passage about turning (Jer.31:18) that Asaph invokes repeatedly in Psalm 80, which is constructed on the idea of turning :-

    Turn us, O God …
    Turn us, O God Almighty …
    Turn us, O Lord God Almighty …
    Turn us O Lord God Almighty

Ps.80: 3,7,14,19*

There is always hope, but we have to recognise the realities of the situation. To escape from the situation – impossible! – needs the sovereign action of God. But more urgent is to escape from our own limitations! Turn us, pleads Asaph. Three times! Three times because he knows that although escape seems impossible, the truth is that change of our personalities is even more impossible! But with God all things are possible.

And so we come to Ps.88: the psalm of Heman the Ezrahite, the blackest in the book. This Psalm has been a Proper Psalm for Good Friday from ancient times, regarded as an utterance of Jesus in his Passion. I have come to the conclusion that this Heman is David’s "seer" (1Chron.25:5) who "prophesied with a harp" (1Chron.25:1), and reputed as proverbially wise (1Kings 4:31). Heman will have followed David into the wilderness, and it was David who was anointed by Samuel, not Heman. David was the leader who always gave his followers hope: the exception that proves the rule was at the death of Absalom, where Joab rebuked David :-

You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You have made it clear today that the commanders and their men mean nothing to you. I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead.

2Sam.19:6

But who knows what drove Heman into the wilderness and what he left behind? And who knows what was the response of the men to the long dark days running from Saul? There must have been plenty of occasion for such a black psalm. But if David had sung such a psalm in the wilderness who would have stayed with him? After all, the Chronicler records that on the death of Absalom :-

The men stole into the city that day as men steal in who are ashamed when they flee from battle

2Sam.19:3

David remained King, even if he was behaving uncharacteristically strangely. But in the wilderness Heman could give voice to despair, where David perhaps could not :-

My soul is full of trouble
    And my life draws near the grave …
    You have overwhelmed me with all your waves
    You have taken from me my closest friends …
    My eyes are dim with grief …
    Do you show your wonders to the dead?
    Do those who are dead rise up and praise you?
    I have suffered your terrors and am in despair
    Your wrath has swept over me …
    You have taken my companions and loved ones from me
    And darkness is my closest friend

Ps.88:3, 7, 10, 15ff

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*“Turn” follows the reading of Michael Wilcock, "The Message of the Psalms" (2 vols., 2001; Part of the Bible Speaks Today series, ed. Alec Moyter; IVP)
It is the early psalms that use the *Selah* and that have superscriptions, and as further support for the proposal that this is a very early Psalm, we can note that it does not quote any of the prophets we have already cited: it seems to be a primary text\(^9\) where we have seen that the later prophetic texts are dense in allusion and direct citation.

There are several features of this psalm that are significant. It is a *song*, with a specified tune "*mahalath leannoth*" ("the suffering of affliction") and *selahs*. More than that, it is a *maskil*, that is, a song used for teaching purposes in some generalised sense\(^10\). It is also in a position of significance as the penultimate psalm in Book III.

The ancient editors of *Psalms* clearly thought that Ps.88, for all its blackness, had some special value for God's faithful people. It is not hidden away in a corner but given some prominence. It is not to be mumbled in secret but to be *sung* (implying deliberate practice!). And David recognised Heman as a *seer* – a prophet who sees the revelation of God.

The text of our Scriptures is bold. The authors did not pull their punches! They do not shrink from the extremes of emotion, whether joy or despair. They teach us to be joyful, and – a much harder lesson – they teach us that even despair is legitimate, provided we remember that, despite all, underneath are the everlasting arms. Even in our blackest moments, there remains a thread that connects us still to the One for whom nothing is impossible, the One able to cast down the mighty from their seats, the One able to bring life to the dead! Most astonishing of all, God has *rent the heavens* to come to us and to turn us from our evil ways and to rescue us from the oppression of the wicked. His Shepherd has sought the lost sheep, found them and brought them home. He is the one that, as on the very first day in the same miracle of creation, brings light into the darkness.

And yet … in this psalm only the *existence* of the thread of hope is acknowledged. The psalm says nothing about hope itself. It says only :-

\[\begin{align*}
&\text{O LORD, the God that saves me … I cry to you for help} \\
&\text{In the morning my prayer comes to you} \\
&\text{Ps.88:1, 13}
\end{align*}\]

Morning – the time when darkness flees away. Maybe God, the God who continually contradicts us, whose thoughts are not our thoughts, will also contradict Heman's conclusion, *My closest friend, utter darkness!* But even this conclusion, as temporary as are we ourselves, is legitimate.

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\(^9\) Kirkpatrick points out that *Abaddon* of v.11 is apparently late, occurring only in Proverbs and Job. This may be misleading though, since the primary root *abad* is used early for "destroyed" and its cognates (see Ex.10:7; Jos.23:13,16). The fact that the Targum (spoken translations or paraphrases of the Hebrew text, originally into Aramaic – see Neh.8:8) renders v.6 allegorically, *thou hast placed me in exile, which is like the nether pit*, suggests that the Psalm was much earlier and in need of interpretation.

\(^10\) see Ps.32:8; 42:5, 11; 44:1; 52:1; 53:1; 54:4; 55:22; 78:1; 89:2; 142:2f
7.4 Lament asserting Covenant

The psalm that immediately follows Heman's lament closes Book III, is a lament and is also a maskil. It is late, meditating on the destruction of Jerusalem (586BC: "you have broken through all his walls / and reduced his strongholds to ruins", v.40; cp. Ps.80:12), but it seems to deliberately look back to the earlier Ps.88 with its four Selahs11.

This psalm is a Proper Psalm for Christmas Day. Where Ps.88 was personal, Ps.89 is national. Where Ps.88 clung, despite the dark night of the soul, to the existence of the hope of God in the face of the present evil; Ps.89 looks, despite the cold light of day, to the fulfilment of the promises of God in the face of their manifest failure. Why is it proper to Christmas Day? It is because Jesus was born into a world of darkness, at a time when the eyes of the faithful were failing, looking for the promise of God (Pss.69:3; 119:82, 123), and this psalm explicitly and emphatically recalls the Covenant.

What is known for sure? "Forever" (αιων, aeon, in the LXX) occurs again and again (seven times), and five times specifically recalling God's explicit promise to David :-

11 see above §3.4. "Selah"'s are characteristic of the ancient psalms (of David, Asaph and the sons of Korah). Recall that the LXX translators (as early as the fourth century BC) had forgotten what Selah meant.

12 The references are, God's covenant (vv.1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49); God's promise (vv.4, 29, 36); David as God's 'servant' (vv.3, 20; and see also 2Sam.7:5, 8; 1Chron.17:4, 7; 1Kings 11:36, 38; 14:8; Jer.33:21, 22, 26; Ez.34:23, 24; 37:24, 25); and the Davidic King as "anointed" (vv.20, 38, 51).

so, as a random example, Cordelia's husband, the King of France, is regularly called "France" in King Lear

Remember LORD how your servant has been mocked
How I bear in my heart the taunts of all the nations
The taunts with which your enemies have mocked O LORD
With which they have mocked every step of your anointed one [ευδοκία, Christou] Ps.89:50f

God's love and faithfulness (or covenant) are recalled seven times; God's explicit promise to David to "establish his line" is recalled three times; God calls David "my servant" twice; and the Davidic King is called "anointed" three times, once by God and twice by the Psalmist.12

I will establish your line forever
And make your throne firm through all generations
Ps.89: 4, 29, 36, also 28, 37; also see 2Sam.7:16; 1Chron.17:14; 1Kings 9:5; 2Chron.7:18

The young Church in the first century, reading this in the (Greek) Septuagint (the LXX) would have seen Jesus's title Christos, there at the end of the Psalm. This is not misreading the Psalm! David was anointed King, and the promise was to David and to his line. But when the Psalmist says, All who pass by have plundered him (v.41, see Ps.80:12, Lam.1:12; 2:15; Eze.5:14), "him" is a synecdoche for Jerusalem and hence to Israel, whom of course the King personifies. This is a very common usage, familiar to us from Shakespeare.13
God is and remains faithful to his word, and the whole cosmos is witness to it!

You established your faithfulness in heaven itself …
The heavens praise your wonders O LORD
   Your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones …
The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth
   You founded the world and all that is in it …
Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness
   – and I will not lie to David –
That his line will endure for ever
   And his throne endure before me like the sun
It will be established forever like the moon
The faithful witness in the sky

Selah

Ps. 89: 2, 5, 11, 35ff

But the Psalmist cannot see it; everything looks wrong to him :-

How long, O LORD, will you hide yourself for ever?
   How long will your wrath burn like fire?
Ps. 89:46

How long? God was first to ask this question, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me? (Num.14:11, and see also Ex.10:3, 7; 16:28). But again and again¹⁴ the psalmists ask this question back to God :-

LORD, how long shall the wicked
   how long shall the wicked triumph?
Ps. 94:3

How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever?
   how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?
How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?
   how long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and hear me, O LORD my God
   lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death
Ps. 13:1ff

Christmas is the answer to the question, "How long?"! The angel Gabriel said to Mary,
thou shalt … call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.
Luke 1:31ff

and to the shepherds, the angel said,

unto you is born this day in the city of David [πολεί δαυίδ, polie Dauidd] a Saviour [σωτήρ, soter],
which is Christ the Lord [χριστὸς κυρίος , Christos kyrios].
Luke 2:11

In both of these texts of course Dr. Luke understands perfectly the resonance with Ps.89, as did everyone in the first century. God was redeeming his promise.

¹⁴ see also Pss. 4:2; 6:3; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 82:2; 9013; and cp. Ps.62:3
7.5 Lament: a cry of triumph!

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" – the unforgettable cry of Jesus on the cross (Ps.22:1; Matt.27:46; Mark 15:34) does not sound like a cry of triumph, rather a cry of despair! But it is telling that Matthew previously records the leaders mocking Jesus in precisely the (LXX) terms David uses in Ps.22, saying, He trusted in God :-

let him deliver him now, if he will have him ["delights in him"]

Matthew 27:43

[He trusted in God that] he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him

Psalm 22:8

The leaders quote Ps.22 against Jesus, probably unconsciously since they probably used Aramaic (the vernacular is the language of insult!). But Jesus heard what they said in the terms of Ps.22, which Matthew records (in Greek) in Biblical words.15 It is also telling that the Evangelists record Jesus' words in Aramaic, giving the Greek translation. In times of extreme pressure, when our feet are to the fire, we revert to our mother tongue.16

What did Jesus think of in that terrible time? The taunts of the wicked did not rankle with him – instead he heard in their words the words of the psalmist. How do we resist evil? Satan tries to undermine us at every turn: in response we should seek to subvert his lies in every way. Luther exhorts us in the Small Catechism to put the best construction on everything. This is a very radical thing to do, the world delights in putting the worst construction on things, which leads to a vicious cycle of destruction, a vortex of suspicion. But putting the best construction on things opens us up to the realities of God; to the possibilities that God has stored up in his treasure house, transforming possibilities that can remake the world. God deals in reality; the Maker of Heaven and Earth is not into illusion:

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things

Philippians 4:8

When you are pinned down in an evil place, where illusions come to an end, of what do you think then? In the psalm David sings precisely of the transformations of God that lie secure in His purposes :-

Dominion belongs to the Lord
and he rules over the nations …
My seed will serve him
It will be told to generations to come
They will proclaim his bounty to a people aborning
for he has done

Psalm 22:28, 30f

Where is reality? Nobody disputes the reality of the current situation, which can be, and sometimes is, excruciating. But what underlies the present? In God's economy, the future underlies the present! Why else would Paul assert so definitely, now abide faith, hope and love (1Cor.13:13)? God always was the God of the future as well as the present;

15 Eusebius (Church History, AD324) reported that Matthew's original text was in Aramaic, but this is now lost so it is not now possible to compare with the Targums and see explicitly what interpretation is happening. Eusebius quotes a text of Papias (c.60-c135?) – the Logia, and also a book of Irenaeus (c.130-202) – “Against Heresies". Other early authors (including Jerome, 347-420) also thought that Matthew was originally in Aramaic, but of course they are not independent of each other.

16 This is why the task of the Wyclif Bible Translators is so important, to make available to as many as possible the sacred text in their mother tongue.
the Beginning and the End; the Alpha and the Omega; he who was, and is, and is to come; the builder of the New Creation; the Judge on the Last Day.

It is worth pointing out that it was God who made light, and light was the first and the simplest of his creatures. Photons (particles of light) travel, unsurprisingly, at the speed of light. But it is an established fact that never fails to shock people when they first grasp it, that the principle of relativity guarantees that the faster you go, the slower time runs. For a photon, time stops altogether! A photon created at the Big Bang that survives to the end of the Universe (and there will be some of these!) will "think" that zero time has passed! For a photon, all times are one. If there exist creatures for which time does not pass, is it imaginable that the Creator does not know the end from the beginning (Is.46:10)?

The beginning and the end. Jesus certainly knew this psalm very well by heart, and when he quoted the beginning he would certainly have been thinking also of the end. Robert Alter says of this psalm's last line that "the abruptness reflects the Hebrew": "He has done it", which in the Hebrew is only implied. But to name the object is specifically to limit it, and David's point is precisely that God's doing is unlimited – he is limited neither by his power, nor by necessity, not even by our expectations! God's doing extends from the beginning to the end. Whatever things are true … says Paul, think on these things: and Jesus quoting this psalm shows that he had set his mind to look for the truth of God, to hope for the ending that was in the hand of his Father:

He was oppressed and afflicted …
    By oppression and judgement he was taken away …
After his travail
    He will see; he will be satisfied
By his knowledge the Righteous One, my servant, will justify many

Is.53:7ff (following Motyer, ibid.)

His knowledge: Jesus knew Psalm 22, and he knew that the opening verse was not the last word. It is certain that Jesus also had in the forefront of his mind this passage from Isaiah – the early story of Philip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8:32f) says as much, so we definitely should read the passages together. "Travail" here in Is.53:11 is the same as the word for toil used in Deut.26:7: misery, toil and oppression, emphasising not so much the physical pain of the moment but the spiritual misery of oppression.

For every sentient creature knows pain, it is an essential part of the autonomous nervous system. The disabling of the pain response, as in leprosy, is a very nasty pathological condition. But only mankind knows oppression. Being in chains is a denial of our humanity. My God, my God … – this is not a cry of physical pain, it is the cry of the oppressed soul looking for justice. The passion of the psalmist is the same as the passion of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, and of Jesus Christ on the cross; it is the passion of the innocent one ground down by injustice who cries out for the rescue of God. And the burden of this prophecy in Isaiah is that in a strange and wonderful way, it is precisely the passion of the innocent one that is the means of the revelation of the rescue of God.

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17 A terrible anthropomorphism! Of course, photons do not think, they simply are. They are the simplest thing in the Universe, but it needs a Nobel prize-winning physicist to write a little book of astonishing depth and difficulty to explain precisely what they are (Richard Feynman, QED. 1976). This elegant and beautiful book ranks as a world classic in my opinion. But the simplicity of the photon is such that for it time, that great complicator, does not exist.
Passion is to the heart, and knowledge is of the heart. (Biblically, we emphasise again, knowledge is of the heart, not of the head!) How does the Suffering Servant justify many by his knowledge? Surely justification comes by actions, not knowledge? But we must avoid the post-Enlightenment reductionism that we have got used to! Knowledge is not passive but active! By our knowledge we "acknowledge" the truth – clearly an action! Biblically, knowledge is just as active as faith, hope and love. We must know the beloved! "The time is coming", declares the Lord, "when ... no longer will a man ... teach his brother saying 'know the Lord', for they will all know me from the least to the greatest", declares the Lord (Jer.31:31-34).

He has done. The hanging sentence terminating Ps.22 points to the unimagined wonders that God has in mind and will do. And the greatest of these is justice: generations to come will proclaim his righteousness [tsêdâkâh] (v.31) :-

- He has not despised or disdained
  the suffering of the afflicted one
- He has not hidden his face from him
  but has listened to his cry for help

Ps.22:24

God's justice is not mechanical, but transformative. He works by love and not by rule – no "three strikes and you're out!" with God! Even in these circumstances the child of God can trust him, because he is just and his justice will prevail. For the children of God, the Day of Judgement is not the Day of Wrath (Zeph.1:15), but is the day when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or tears, for the old order of things will have passed away (Rev.21:4); a day when a fountain will be opened (Zech.13:1); a day when every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and none shall make them afraid (Mic.4:4).

Nevertheless, the beginning is where you start. Whatever else can and should be said, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? is and remains a lament.
8 The confidence psalms and the trustworthiness of God

The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah: This is what the great King, the King of Assyria says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? …"

Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent a message to Hezekiah: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says, Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib King of Assyria, this is the word the LORD has spoken against him:
The Virgin Daughter of Zion despises and mocks you
The Daughter of Jerusalem tosses her head as you flee
Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed?
Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes in pride?
Against the Holy One of Israel! 2Kings 18:19; 19:20ff; Is.36:4; 37:21ff

On what do we base our confidence? Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel was deported to Assyria and dispersed: the ten tribes were lost. Sennacherib's campaign continued, and twelve years later he was camped outside the gates of Jerusalem having taken all the other cities of Judah. He was (apparently) invincible: why then did the Jews not open the gates to him to forestall the sack of their city?

This is one of those pivotal moments that the Chronicler chose to emphasise to us by recording both the events themselves and the responses of Hezekiah and the prophet in a text paralleled by the text of the prophecies of Isaiah. Isaiah's contemporary, Micah, has explained it to us :-

Do not trust a neighbour
Put no confidence in a friend
Even with her who lies in your embrace
Be careful with your words
For a son dishonours his father
A daughter rises up against her mother
A daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law
A man's enemies are the members of his own household
But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD
I wait for God my Saviour
my God will hear me
Do not gloat over me, my enemy!
Though I have fallen, I will rise
Though I sit in darkness
The LORD will be my light Mic.7:5-8

Jesus has this passage in mind when he prophesies divisions in families: all the synoptic Evangelists report this, but Luke uses the same terms as Micah, setting fathers against sons, mothers against daughters, and mothers-in-law against daughters-in-law (Lk.12:52f; cp. Matt.10:21; Mk.13:12). Cataclysmic events beget terror, and as Micah is reflecting on the fall of Samaria in 722 BC Jesus is foreseeing the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Wherein then lies our confidence? "But as for me", asserts Micah, "I watch in hope for the LORD" (Mic.1:7).

"More than the dawnwatcher watches for the dawn" sings the psalmist (Ps.130:6): are we confident that the dawn will come? Of course we are! It is only the time of the coming the dawnwatcher awaits impatiently. But David teaches me to "still and quieten my soul ... within me" (Ps.131:2f) in "waiting patiently" (Ps.37:7) for the Lord.
We will not understand the psalms if we do not appreciate the confidence of the psalmists. This confidence pervades Psalms through and through. The psalmists use a very simple, and yet extraordinarily immediate language of yearning and love, to express this underlying confidence of theirs: thirst, rest, an awaiting of the beloved, an exalting of him, all together with the underlying security that is the hallmark of confidence.

As examples of thirsting for God, resting in God, and waiting on God we read Pss.42, 62 & 27 closely. But to explore exalting in God we read Ps.30 together with the book of Job; this is because the attitude of the lover to exalt and praise the beloved should transcend circumstances, and it is very necessary to underline this for modern and comfortable readers. And to consider security in God we refer to the whole of Book IV of Psalms, among many other passages.

8.1 “An ever-present help in trouble”

It is easy to trust in God when things are going well: the problems start when the troubles come! David sings in Ps.22: Be not far from me, for trouble is near (v.11), and the psalmist of Ps.119 similarly exclaims: Those who devise wicked schemes are near, but they are far from your law (v.150). The two versions of David's psalm that appear in the David collections of Books III and V both say: Give us help from trouble for vain is the help of man (Pss.60:11; 108:12), but in the later one David is exultant :-

My heart, O God, is steadfast …
Awake, harp and lyre!
I will awaken the dawn …
For great is your love, higher than the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches to the skies.

Ps.108:1ff

But it is the song of the sons of Korah (Ps.46), referring so evocatively to God's appearance to Elijah (1 Kings 19:12), that expresses perfectly the confidence of the people of God, trouble or no :-

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.

Selah

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God …
God is within her, she will not fall;
The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Ps.46

…

He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.’

Ps.46

The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Selah

God is our refuge – Selah! – God is our refuge. We will not fear, although it may be an effort of will: we will still our hearts and listen through the whirlwinds and through the storms to him who is Maker of the winds and the waves; who is able to whisper in his power to our spirits, Peace, be still! (Mark 4:39).
8.2 Thirsting for God

"As the hart pants after the water brooks, so panteth my soul for thee, O God" (Ps.42:1).

So the King James translators, opening Book II with this striking and evocative image, beautifully set to music by Mendelssohn (and note that the superscription indeed directs that this psalm be sung). The psalmist breaks the psalm into two parts, each ending with the chorus, "why art thou cast down, O my soul? ... Hope thou in God! ...".

It is worth pointing out that the psalmists often use archaic language as a poetical device, ("so panteth my soul for thee") and modern setters of the psalms should bear this in mind. It is not necessary to be colloquial in Psalms, it is necessary to use words effectively with regard to their poetical impact, just as the original poets did. Note also that Mendelssohn set this psalm in German, but the cantata works just as well in English – the poetry of Psalms seems somehow to transcend the particular language. This in itself is remarkable: it is notoriously hard to translate poetry.

This whole psalm turns on the figure of thirst, and we must remember that being subjected to thirst in a hot country is a sharper experience than in cooler latitudes. The initial verb "pants" (KJV) is 'arag in the Hebrew, and Robert Alter tells us that this word "appears only twice in the Bible so that its meaning is not known for certain. Some commentators think that it may refer to the sound that an animal makes as it drinks, others to the animal’s bending its neck towards the water". The psalmist is emphasising the concrete immediacy of his need for God, given his circumstances. He does not use "spiritual" language – on the contrary, he uses very simple and direct language. What can be more straightforward than thirst? Even babies understand that! Similarly, the my soul that the KJV uses repeatedly, is more immediate in the Hebrew. It is nafshi, the intensive form of the first-person pronoun.

"My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God" (v.2). Note that "living water" (cf. John 4:10; 7:38) is idiomatic Hebrew for fresh (drinkable) water, so that "living God" may also contain an allusion to the water imagery. "My tears became my bread day and night" (v.3). Eating salty tears (definitely not living!) again continues the thirst metaphor.

The refrain is rendered by Robert Alter as :-

How bent, my being [nafshi]
how you [singular] moan for me

Ps.42:5,11

alluding to the hart bending its neck to the water, and referring to v.6: "my soul [nafshi] is bent about me", that is, "I am in deep trouble"; an idea the poet immediately expands in the next verse :-

Deep calls to deep in the noise of your waterspouts
all your waves and breakers have gone over me

Ps.42:7

This is quoted by Jonah 2:3, and is also alluded to by John when he says that there will be no sea in the New Creation (Rev.21:1). Ancient peoples saw the sea as a symbol of Chaos: this is the meaning of the Pyramids, regular (rational) tetrahedra emerging as solid rock from the primæval chaos. Here is also the meaning of the enigmatic statement, "darkness was on the face of the deep" (Gen.1:2) in the Creation story. God takes the First Day to establish the light (which is "good"). He takes the Second Day to structure the primæval

1 ‘arag appears in this psalm twice in the first verse, and in Joel 1:20 (also in the context of animals longing for water). I follow Robert Alter’s commentary on this psalm. Alter clearly prefers the "bending" option, which is echoed in his translation (without comment) of the disquiet (KJV) or downcast (NIV) in the chorus as bent.
water, and makes no comment on it! It is on the Third Day that he makes the land and seas, and also calls them "good". When the children of Israel walk through the Red Sea, Moses comments in terms that evoke Creation:

... the deep waters covered them [Pharaoh's host] ...
The surging waters stood firm like a wall
the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea

Ex.15:5, 8

There is nothing ambivalent or dichotomous in God; we are not dualists. God's power is absolute; he rules the deeps too.

When the psalmist sings, "Deep calls to deep", he is telling us that God is the Creator, with power over all his creatures however uncomfortable we may be finding them at present. We should be reminded of Paul's hymn:

Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord

Rom.8:39

"Deep calls to deep ...": Sigmund Freud "discovered" the unconscious, but two-and-a-half millennia previously the psalmists already knew that land well. Laing "discovered" the Divided Self, but Paul, tutored by the psalmists, understood alienation some two millennia ago (Eph.2:12; 4:18; Col.1:21). Of course, for Paul (and therefore also for us) alienation is a Covenant category – aliens are precisely those who are outside the Covenant.

8.3 Resting in God

I am encouraged that there is now a magnificent hymn setting of Ps.62:

My soul finds rest in God alone, My Rock and my salvation,
A fortress strong against my foes, And I will not be shaken
Though lips may bless and hearts may curse, And lies like arrows pierce me,
I'll fix my heart on righteousness, I'll look to Him who hears me
Find rest, my soul, in God alone, Amid the world's temptations;
When evil seeks to take a hold, I'll cling to my salvation
Though riches come and riches go, Don't set your heart upon them;
The fields of hope in which I sow, Are harvested in heaven
I'll set my gaze on God alone, And trust in Him completely;
With every day pour out my soul, And He will prove His mercy
Though life is but a fleeting breath, A sigh too brief to measure,
My King has crushed the curse of death, And I am His forever.
O praise Him, hallelujah, My Delight and my Reward;
Everlasting, never failing, My Redeemer, my God

Ps.62: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSp-3kvKQZs downloaded 8th June 2012
Written by Stuart Townend / Aaron Keyes (http://www.kingswayworship.com)

Kingsway are entirely right when they speak of "songs of substance ... songs that feed the church with a message that changes the world ... songs of depth and truth ... foundational resources ... emerging as some of the great hymns of tomorrow." The psalms have always been sung, and we have to learn to sing them again if they are really to speak to us in all the power breathed into them by the Spirit. This psalm setting has repeatedly moved me to tears – the music has a remarkable quality and depth in its classic simplicity, just like the text of the original poems themselves!

2 Sigmund Freud, The Ego and the Id (Das Ich und das Es, 1923)
However, the setting is not of the psalm itself but is an interpretation and commentary on it. The psalm itself says more and different things. This is in no way a criticism of the setting, which has its own great value. But the setting and the psalm should not be confused. The people of God should habitually go back to the original text to listen to the authentic voice of the Spirit unmediated by any other voice, however gifted, however helpful, however inspired. The Spirit bloweth where he listeth (see John 3:8), and he has his own ideas! God is an original thinker – actually the original thinker! – and every man or woman of God should have his or her own personal dialogue with him; how else will radically new things come to pass? This of course in no way minimises the intrinsic value of the church, the community of saints, to nurture and encourage us. If we do not habitually sing to God together we run the grave risk of sinking into solipsism.

As a matter of fact, this interplay between the individual and the corporate is one feature of this psalm. David was called the sweet singer of Israel (2Sam.23:1), specifically because he was able to translate his personal walk with God into prayers and praises available for everyone’s participation. Paul commented, I would that ye all ... prophesied (1Cor.14:5) quoting Moses: Would God that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them! (Num.11:29). But David set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying (1Chron.25:1), and there were 288 of them, all "trained and skilled in music" (1Chron.25:7). Saul was accounted a prophet, the text emphasises this by repeating itself: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" (1Sam.10:11, 12), but David is never called a "prophet" (until Peter quotes Ps.16:8-11 at the Day of Pentecost, see Acts 2:30)! I think this is because the psalms are themselves a sort of prophecy and the Chronicler did not want to confuse the two things. But even before Jesus sent the Spirit, everyone could sing the psalms – it was a church activity! – so everybody participated in a sort of prophesying, that is, speaking the immediate word of God. How much more now, seeing that we have Christ in us, the hope of glory (Col.1:27)?

For the lead player, on jeduthun, a David psalm

Only in God is my being quiet
From Him is my rescue
Only He is my rock and my rescue
I shall not stumble at all
How long will you demolish a man
commit murder, each one of you
like a leaning wall
a shaky fence?
Only from his high place they schemed to shake him
They took pleasure in lies
With their mouths they blessed
And inwardly cursed Selah

4 Alter says: Jeduthun was one of David’s musicians, and his name appears in several psalm headings. In Ps.39 the preposition is different ("for") definitely indicating a proper name. But here it is ambiguous and may be an opaque musical term
5 The emphatic "Only" (‘akh) begins no less than six verses! Other translations (eg. NIV, KJV) do not bring this out this feature of the text
6 "being" translates nefesh; "properly a breathing creature, that is, animal of (abstract) vitality; used very widely in a literal, accommodated or figurative sense (bodily or mental)" (Strong’s Concordance). Every occurrence of soul (that is, inner being) in KJV uniformly translates this word.
Only in God be quiet, my being
for from Him is my hope
Only He is my rock and my rescue
my fortress – I shall not stumble
From God is my rescue and my glory
my strength's rock and my shelter in God
Trust in Him at all times, O people
Pour out your hearts before Him
God is our shelter

Selah

Only breath – mankind
the sons of man are a lie
On the scales all together
they weigh less than a breath
Do not trust in oppression
and of theft have no illusions
Though it bear fruit of wealth
set your heart not upon it
One thing God has spoken
two things have I heard
That strength is but God's
and Yours, Master, is kindness

For you requite a man by his deeds


Robert Alter is a scholar with an excellent ear for the Hebrew, whose translation principles are to give as literal a rendering as possible and to keep as close as possible to the rhythm of the original. I think that the rhythm of this translation really helps to appreciate the terseness of the original: we are cut loose to soar and worship Him.

What Aaron Keyes' hymn does not do is to maintain the interplay between the personal and the corporate that is prominent in the text. David is intensely personal, but in the latter part of the psalm he addresses the people with multiple imperatives – trust in Him, do not trust in oppression; pour out your hearts to Him, do not set your hearts on wealth! When David finally concludes personally it is very clear he is speaking for and to all of us.

When God speaks, he speaks coherently: One thing God has spoken! But when we listen, we must listen for multiple messages: Two things have I heard! Why else do we have one mouth but two ears, if not to speak with integrity and listen carefully? When we have heard one thing we are sure God is speaking to us, we must not make the mistake of thinking that the understanding we have attained exhausts the meaning God intends. There is always more!

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7 Alter says: The Hebrew word used for "illusion" is derived from the same root as hevel, "breath"
8 Alter says: This last verse lacks any parallelism (rhythmic, syntactic or semantic) in the Hebrew. It may be set here as a sort of prose coda to the poem. But it is a fitting conclusion to the quiet eloquence of the psalm, summing up David's sense that he can trust, not in ill-gotten wealth, but in God whose justice is guaranteed by his strength and whose provision is guaranteed by his kindness.
8.4 Waiting for God

Wait for the Lord
Be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord. Ps.27:14 (NIV)

In Robert Alter's translation of this lovely psalm, he renders the first word ("wait") as "hope" (and also in Ps.25:5,21; 37:34). Strong's Concordance gives the Hebrew as :-

kavah: a primitive root: to bind together (perhaps by twisting), ie. collect (or figuratively, to expect); rendered in KJV by, variously, gather together, look, tarry, patiently, wait for, wait on

The LXX here uses ὑπομεινόν (upomeinon) for "wait". This occurs only three times in the New Testament, each time with the same wording: "he that endures to the end shall be saved"; each time in long speeches of Jesus. It is fairly rare in the Greek Old Testament, occurring only twice in the histories, and three times each in the Psalms and the prophecies. In Job all the (human) speakers use it. But all of these uses are in significant places, giving weight to the idea. I think Alter is right to render it "hope" (although in the New Testament "hope" usually renders "ελπις, elpis"): "waiting" in this context unequivocally implies "hoping".

So when Jesus explains "wait for the Lord" as "he that endures to the end shall be saved" he surely has this psalm in mind. The Christians were known as "followers of the Way" (explicit in Acts 22:4; 24:14 and clear in Acts 9:2;19:9; 24:22): there is nothing passive about "waiting for God"! Bunyan had it right, it is the pilgrim's progress; and he saw Christian's laborious road while lying in Bedford Gaol. Here in this psalm we have "teach me thy Way, O LORD" (Ps.27:11), and this idea permeates the Scriptures. As we travel the Way we must not be like Balaam, whose heart was far from God. He was not paying attention, he was not waiting on God, and he failed to see the angel with the drawn sword – only his donkey saved his life (Num.22:30)! Will our hearts make donkeys of us, or will we wait on God?

I repeat, there is nothing passive about this waiting, as this psalm makes very clear. Though battle is roused against me / nevertheless do I trust (v.3). In battle you have on your armour, tighten your belt and sharpen your sword; you do not close your eyes! And now listen to the imperative :-

 Unto Thee my heart said:
 Seek ye my face!
 Thy face, LORD I do seek

Ps.27:8

Here is a very strange construction in the Hebrew. It looks as if it makes no sense, mixing up singular and plural pronouns! "Unto Thee [God] my heart said / seek ye my face"? Is my heart giving instructions to God? Whose face? Can David not decide if God is one or many?

9 ο δε υπομεινας εις τελος ουτος σωθησεται (o de upomeinas eis telos outos sothesetai); Matt.10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13.

10 used by Balaam (Num.22:19), the king of Israel (2Kings 6:33), Job (3:9; 17:13), Bildad (Job 8:15), Zophar (Job 20:26), Eliphaz (Job 22:21), Elihu (Job 33:5), David (Ps.25:3; 27:14; 37:34), Solomon (Prov.20:22), Isaiah (59:9), and God himself (Zeph.3:8; Hab.2:3). Note that kavar is used much more frequently in the Hebrew Old Testament; the LXX translators also used the related υπεμεινα (upemeina, I waited) and cognates many times in the Psalms (25:5, 21; 40:1; 56:6; 69:20 ["looked"]; 106:13; 119:95; 130:5), and occasionally elsewhere (Jud.3:25; Job 7:3; 9:4; 32:4, 16; Is.60:9; Jer.14:19), to render this.

11 John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which is to Come (1678)

12 Ex.18:20; 1 Sam.12:23; 1 Kings 8:36; Pss.25:4,8f,12; 32:8, 51:13; 86:11; 119:33; Is.2:3; Micah 4:2; Matt.22:16; Mark 12:14; Luke 20:21

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Actually, this is a brilliant example of poetic brevity, where the poet strips out all redundancy trusting that we will search for his meaning. David is thinking of Deut.4:29: *If thou shalt seek the LORD thy God thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul,* and this passage in turn looks to the primary command to *love the LORD with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength*\(^\text{13}\). Love seeks the beloved: and when she finds him she will not let him go (Song 3:4). It is Deut.4:29 that Jesus refers to when he says, *he that seeketh findeth* (Matt.7:8; Luke 11:10); also quoted by Solomon (Prov.8:17) and Jeremiah (29:13). But to find God the right attitude of heart is required, as Solomon points out: -

A scorners seeketh wisdom, and findeth it not  
but knowledge is easy unto him that understandeth.  

Prov.14:6

and the prophets also underline the terrible truth that God *hides himself* from the wicked: -

They shall go with their flocks and with their herds to seek the LORD  
but they shall not find him  
he hath withdrawn himself from them  

Hosea 5:6

and from Amos even more urgently: -

And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east  
they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the LORD  
and shall not find it  

Amos 8:12

Again and again the Beloved says she *did not find him*: -

I looked for the one my heart loves  
I looked for him but did not find him …  
I will search for the one my heart loves  
So I looked for him but did not find him …  
I looked for him but did not find him  
I called for him but he did not answer  

Song 3:1f; 5:6

and Hosea pulls at our heartstrings when he says: -

And she shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now.  

Hosea 2:7

But Solomon turns up the intensity even more when he asserts in the most extraordinary language\(^\text{14}\) that God *desires* us – his is not a cold regard but a passionate *relationship* with us: -

May the wine go straight to my lover, flowing gently over lips and teeth  
I belong to my lover and his desire is for me  
Come my lover, let us go to the countryside  
Let us spend the night in the villages  
Let us go early to the vineyard to see if the vines have budded  
if their blossoms have opened …  
There I will give you my love  
The mandrakes send out their fragrance  
And at our door is every delicacy both new and old  
That I have stored up for you, my lover.  

Song 7:9ff

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\(^\text{14}\) That the sexuality of this passage is deliberate is underlined by the mandrakes, known as an aphrodisiac (Gen.30:14ff).
The beloved longs to see the face of the lover, but no man can see the face of the Lord and live (Ex.33:20). However, God says, through Aaron to the congregation of the people:—

The Lord bless thee, and keep thee
The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee
The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace

Num.6:24ff

It was David who first "sought the face of the Lord" according to the witness of the text (2Sam.21:1). He desired to see His face and he wasn't afraid of the consequences. He desired to dwell in the house of the Lord and to gaze upon his beauty (v.4). I think that Ps.27 is earlier than Ps.24 which was composed for David's taking of Jerusalem: Ps.24 is more meditative and much less emotionally immediate than Ps.27, but it also has an implied imperative to Jacob to seek his face. —

This is the generation of them that seek him,
that seek thy face, Jacob. Ps.24:6

David's psalm of thanks in 1Chron.16 also exhorts the people to "seek his face always" (v.11) – this psalm is later in turn than Ps.24.

When David says in Ps.27, seek ye his face, he is calling his people to follow him in doing the dangerous, nay, even impossible (but with God all things are possible!) business of coming into the presence of God. David was a charismatic revolutionary leader, and he was charismatic precisely because he was one to go the extra mile, who did the unexpected, who refused to do unrighteously. Why did he not kill his oppressor, Saul, on not one but two occasions (1Sam.24:16; 26:21)? When we follow David in instructing our hearts: seek ye his face, we recall to our minds God's command, and the imperatives of his desire for us: Rise up my love, my fair one, come away! (Song 2:10).

If I but trust to see the Lord's goodness in the land of the living —

Ps.27:13

Now we come full circle to the end of the poem. This penultimate verse is an ellipsis – an incomplete sentence. The ancient Hebrew authors did not hesitate to use any rhetorical device to communicate their hearts: the ellipsis is not common but is always very effective in the Bible. The first use of it is at the Fall of mankind, also very highly charged emotionally, perhaps David is referring obliquely to this?

And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever —

Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden …

Gen.3:22f

Again it is impossibility in view. God is passionate about us – he always takes us seriously and does not hesitate to turn the world upside down, for good or ill, in response to our actions. So let us wait confidently for him, trusting that we will see his goodness if only we strengthen our hearts and earnestly seek his face.

15 Kirkpatrick points out that we hear the vocative "O Jacob", but, he says, "the construction is harsh" – the vocative is not present in the Hebrew. But I think there is no doubt here that David want Israel as a people to seek his face.
8.5 Exalting in God

I shall exalt thee, LORD, for thou drawst me up …
O let my heart hymn thee and not be still

Ps.30:1, 12

The dead do not praise God. Will dust acclaim thee? David asks: Will it tell thy truth? (v.9). Praise makes us alive! I remember drinking coffee in the sunshine outside Thomaskirche in Leipzig (J.S.Bach's church) while for three hours my daughter praised her future husband almost without taking breath. It remains one of my golden moments. God doesn't need our praise as some sort of ego trip to boost his self-esteem – what a weird idea! Praise is a form of love, there is a mutuality about it – both parties profit. This same verse, v.9, asks: What profit in my blood? Too often today profit is considered as a zero-sum game – if I gain then you must lose. But even in capitalist theory profit is considered ideally to be wealth creating, in an ideal trade both parties gain. I pay money for a cake, but I can't eat money, so I have profited when I eat the cake even though my purse is lighter! The baker is richer because he has been paid for his work, and I am richer because I have relished the cake.

There is a strange asceticism very common today where people seem to consider altruism as an ultimate (and unattainable!) virtue. It is considered selfish – that is, bad! – for me to look for my own benefit. But the commandment is to love thy neighbour as thyself. Love profits the lover as much as the beloved. Do we love because we profit thereby? Absolutely not! Even so, we are increased by our loving, and diminished by our failures of love. Come, let us reason together, say Isaiah (1:18). And when Paul says, For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Rom.8:18) he certainly has in mind for "reckon" the image of a man counting his money. Some things we can add up, and the benefit to us ourselves of our love and praise of another is one of them.

Nevertheless, in the calculus of love it must always be remembered that if love is not gratuitous then it is not true. John said, We love him because he first loved us (I John 4:19), but we don't love him in exchange for him loving us, and he certainly does not love us in exchange for us loving him! Gustavo Gutiérrez has given us a penetrating interpretation of the book of Job in which he emphasises the essential gratuitousness of love, that is, it is essential that love is free – freely given and freely received – for it to be real. Job's comforters were asserting that since Job was in trouble he therefore must have sinned because God rewards righteousness with prosperity. But when Jesus' disciples asked him, of the man blind from birth: who sinned, the man or his parents? Jesus replied: neither, but that the glory of God might be made manifest (John 9:2f). God is not constrained by the unrighteousness of the wicked, but neither is he constrained by the righteousness of the godly. He acts freely for his own purposes, some of which we can glimpse. Job was righteous, yet he suffered. Why?

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In the first half of the book, Job is wrestling with his nightmare of sin: that he deserved his trouble. But he has resolved this by the centre of the book: ‘I know that my redeemer liveth!’ (Job 19:25). The second half of the book is an example of what Peter called the prophets searching intently and with the greatest care for salvation and the grace that was to come (1Pet.1:10). Job ignores his friends and looks beyond his own personal trouble and asks, ‘Why does God not set times for judgement?’ (Job 24:1) at the start of a catalogue of sins against the innocent; sins that have been explicitly proscribed by God. Well does Job say :-

The groans of the dying rise from the city ... but God charges no-one with wrong

Job however knows that he did not do any of these wicked things catalogued in chapter 24. On the contrary, he obeyed the spirit of the Law as well as the letter. This can be read as a commentary on Is.53: "he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God". When Job cries out :-

Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor? ... My harp is tuned to mourning and my flute to the sound of wailing!

is he not identifying with the poor and oppressed? Job's friends considered him "stricken by God". So he was; but not for his own sins, rather for God's glory (John 9:3,24, and cf. Josh.7:19). Woe betide us if we make light of the sound of the flute (cf. Matt.11:17)!

In the end God is angry with Job's friends, calling them fools. He says :-

You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has and notice well that he says this twice! What had they said to make God angry? At the outset of the book the satan had presented our relationship with God as a mercenary arrangement: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9) He implied that Job got a very good return for his righteousness. But Jesus teaches a completely different sort of relationship, a relationship based precisely on the gratuitous love that so exercised the poet of Job :-

Freely you have received, freely give

Job's three friends were teaching a theology of retribution - a man got what he deserved, but the truth is exactly the contrary: the love of God is freely given to us. It is a gift, not a

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18 It is possible that we read this text anachronistically, reading Christology into the verse. This is the (somewhat tentative) consensus of scholars today. "Redeemer" certainly had rather different connotations then. Nevertheless, I think that our reading does grasp an essential truth that really is in the text. But we cannot go into this here! It would be a lengthy digression on what is already a digression!

19 Significantly he starts with moving boundary stones, specifically cursed (Deut.27:17, see also Deut 19:14), and continues with theft, against the specific Commandment (Ex.20:15; Deut.24:17, see also Lev.19:11,13; Ez.18:16). The orphan and the widow are taken advantage of (Ex.22:22) and the livelihood of the poor is taken for a pledge (Deut.24:17; Ez.18:16). They make the poor naked (Ex.22:26; Deut.24:13; Ez.18:16). They surround the poor with plenty but do not allow them to partake (Deut.25:4; Tit.5:18). They snatch the child of the widow for a debt (2Kings 4:1).

20 Not only did he not commit adultery, he "made a covenant with his eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (31:1, see what Jesus says about this in Matt.5:28). He is clothed with righteousness (29:14; Is.61:10). He is eyes to the blind and feet to the lame, just as Jesus makes the blind to see and the halt to go (29:15; Matt.11:4). He broke the fangs of the wicked, echoing David (29:17; 1Sam.17:35; Pss.3:7; 58:6; 101:8). Like God himself (as David says in Ps.68:5) he was a father to the fatherless (29:16; 31:8) and a defender of widows (29:13; 31:16).

21 "Those who sow trouble reap it" (4:8), "God has even forgotten some of your sin" (11:6), "When your children sinned against him he gave them over to the penalty of their sin" (8:4). For, as we all know, the
bargain! God's free love is constrained by the righteousness of the righteous just as little as it is constrained by the wickedness of the wicked. If it were so constrained, how would God be able to bring new things to pass? "I went down to the grove ... to look at the new growth". How would we have been saved if the righteousness of Jesus had kept the cross from him? Just as Jesus sharply identified this suggestion of Peter's with the counsel of Satan (Matt.16:22,23) so is God angry with Job's friends, whose theology is so like the satan's.

Confidence is built up by praise: the lover is himself encouraged by praising the beloved. The reverse is also true: was not Othello diminished by listening to the lies of Iago? He should have actively praised Desdemona, then he would not have been plunged into tragedy.

But the praise must be true, since praise from a deceitful heart is no praise at all (Prov.27:6); in this psalm David is specifically thinking of life from death. Death cannot exalt God: will the dust praise thee? David asks (v.9). The very first verse sets out David's heart:

I shall exalt thee, LORD
For thou drawest me up …
LORD, thou broughtest me up from Sheol
and gavest me life from those gone down to the Pit

As God has exalted me so shall I exalt God. But this is not a bargain, it is not a commercial transaction: both parties act in entire freedom. Freely David has received, and freely he responds – for God loves a cheerful giver (2Cor.9:7!)

Robert Alter points out that "draw me up" renders the Hebrew daloh, the verb used for drawing water from a well. He says: "Death then is imagined as a deep pit from which the speaker has been drawn up by God." This is immediately confirmed by David saying explicitly, you brought me up from Sheol. He goes on to sing:

What profit in my blood
in my going down deathward
Will dust acclaim thee
will it tell thy truth? …
Thou hast turned my dirge into a dance for me
undone my sackcloth and bound me with joy
O, let my heart hymn thee and be not still

In context, "still" in v.12 is the stillness of death, but it is a constant refrain of the psalmists: I shall not die, but live! (Ps.118:17). How do we know we are alive? By hymning God. How does the lover know she is alive? By praising the beloved!

God's response to this is to turn our dirge into a dance; generalised synecdoches for mourning into rejoicing (cf. Jer.31:13; Ps.126:6): the following verset introduces a new image of unbinding and binding to make this concrete. It is not just being clothed with joy (Ps.132:9, 16; Is.61:10), it is being bound with joy, an image of the bride binding on her wages of sin is death (Prov.10:16; Rom.6:23), but Paul goes on to say, "but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord".

22 Song 6:11; and see Is.42:10; 65:17; Jer.31:22; Ez.18:31; 36:26; 37:12; Rev.21:1.5
23 "Satan" is a proper name in the New Testament, but in Job "the satan" is not a proper name: it is a word meaning "the accuser" (see Rev.12:10)
24 Robert Alter, The Book of Psalms (a new translation of Psalms, with commentary; 2007). The quotes here from this psalm are Alter's translation (restoring the singular second person verbs and pronouns).
ornaments (Is.49:18). "Unbind him", Jesus said of Lazarus (John 11:44), and I am quite sure Jesus recognised David's song in this. Death to life – that is the burden of the Gospel, based squarely on a close reading of the Hebrew Scriptures!

The psalm is for the "dedication of the temple" according to the superscription25, and the Temple is where the Glory of God resides (2Chron.5:14; Ps.29:9; Rev.15:8). Notice that it says emphatically of the provision of David for building the Temple, that it was a freewill offering: -

The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the LORD. David the king also rejoiced greatly. 1Chron.29:9

The Chronicler says three times, referring to two occasions, that the glory of the Lord filled the temple (2Chron.5:14 and the parallel in 1Kings 8:11; 2Chron.7:1,2); and the response of the people echoed that of David: He is good, his mercy endureth forever (1Chron.16:34; 2Chron.5:13; 7:3,6). Do we say someone is good when he keeps a bargain? No, we say he is fair, or, equivalently, as good as his word. Someone is good when they are willing to do what is not required – this is basic in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), and Jesus makes the same point when he instructs us to turn the other cheek, and walk the extra mile (Matt.5:39ff). If love is not free then it is not love.

Then David said to the whole assembly, "Praise the LORD your God." So they all praised the LORD, the God of their fathers; they bowed low and fell prostrate before the LORD and the king … They ate and drank with great joy in the presence of the LORD that day 1Chron.29:20, 22

The wording of the text may seem to suggest that the "love" is manufactured: David here tells them to "praise God" – are they free to disobey the king? But this cynical reading would be a misreading of the text. It is clear from the report of the subsequent joyful feast that they wanted to praise God, and David was only being a worship leader – his instruction was only for them to do now what they all wanted to do anyway, and a good time was had by all. It should be mentioned that it is a serious theological mistake to neglect parties!26

Ezekiel, echoing the Chronicler, also says three times, and also referring to two occasions, that the glory of the Lord filled the temple (Ez.10:4; 43:5; 44:4). But this is an altogether darker version. In chapter 10 Ezekiel is reporting the Glory departing from Solomon's Temple, and later in the book the Glory returns to the Temple Ezekiel has seen in his vision, the Temple that was never built. Ezra's Temple was not on Ezekiel's plan; nor was Herod's: for all that Herod's Temple was regarded as one of the wonders of the world when it was finished in AD63, it was destroyed by the Romans in AD70 never to be rebuilt. But Jesus foresaw the destruction of the Temple (Matt.26:51; Mark 14:58; John 2:19) long before the Mishnaic scholars came to terms with the final loss of Jewish political hopes after the great disaster of AD137, and Jesus' followers repeatedly pointed to the prophets saying that God did not need the Temple to "live in", as Stephen said: -

The Most High does not live in houses made by men: as the prophet said,

25 Ps.30:0. Unsurprisingly, the superscription is actually rather more ambiguous than this translation suggests. The Hebrew says, "for the house", where house may mean palace. Robert Alter points out that the wording is not the usual one for temple (literally house of the sanctuary in Hebrew), and in any case how can David be singing for a temple that does not yet exist? But the occasion may be the end of the plague of 2Sam.24, when the site of Solomon's Temple was dedicated. Kirkpatrick mentions the possibility of the Feast for the dedication of the Temple established by Judas Maccabaeus in 165 BC to commemorate its purification after the desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes as the occasion for this superscription, but this can be confidently ruled out as far too late. The text was well established by that time.

26 Michele Guinness makes this point comprehensively and very elegantly in The Heavenly Party (2007).
"Heaven is my throne and earth my footstool
What kind of house will you build for me?
says the Lord
Or where will my resting place be?
Hath not my hand made all these things?"
Acts 7:48ff quoting Is.66:1f

Paul said the same thing to the Athenians (Acts 17:24) and in his letters (2Cor.5:1; Eph.2:11; Col.2:11); the writer to the Hebrews also emphasised it (Heb.9:11, 24).

I cried to thee and thou hast healed me
O LORD, thou hast brought me up from Sheol
Ps.30:2f

This psalm is all first-person, yet it is for the "Dedication of the Temple". Is it private or public? Is it individualist or corporate? These are the wrong questions! They anachronistically project onto the ancient text our English Quietism, learned in the persecution of the non-conformists by the Restoration Establishment in John Bunyan's time.

It was not like that! The Temple was to the ancient Israelites, from Solomon on, the actual presence of God; although for the Jews after the Babylonian Exile it became only the symbol of the presence of God (since the Glory had departed, as Ezekiel saw), and for the Jews of the Diaspora the Temple became only the memory of the presence of God (since it was no more). But at the same time David knew what the prophets later said explicitly, that God delights in the heart, in the response of the faithful. For David just as for the early Christians the Temple was a synecdoche for the presence of God. Of course, for David the actual Temple was only anticipated, it was still a promise, and it was only a consequence of the covenant :-

I [says God through Nathan the prophet] have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up from Egypt to this day … the LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you …
2Sam.7:5ff; 1Chron.17:4ff

The promise to David predated the Temple, just as the promise to Abraham predated circumcision. The Glory, the presence of God with his people, does not depend on the Temple: it is the people of God that are the Glory of God. This is not just an individual thing since it is, precisely, a reflection of the First Covenant: in the image of God created he … them (Gen.1:2627). We praise God most truly together, and we worship God most perfectly together. David here speaks in the singular, but he speaks for everyone: we all participate in his psalm. David, the sweet singer of Israel (2Sam.23:1), is here the worship leader :-

Sing to the LORD, you saints of his
praise his holy name …
Weeping may remain for a night
But rejoicing comes in the morning
Ps.30:4f

8.6 Being secure in God

He who dwells in the Most High's shelter
in the shadow of Shaddai lies at night —

The central verse says, In the image of God created he him, male and female created he them. "him" and "them" are emphatic pronouns. "God" is the plural form Elohim but the first "created" is singular. This is an ambiguous construction as it stands, taken alone, but I argue that it should be read as supporting the essential mutuality of mankind. We are not made to be alone. Moreover, I argue strongly that the text makes male and female together the image of God, in equality. Augustine's misogyny is a syncretic import from Platonism that has plagued the Church of God for long enough, and now should be abandoned.
I say of the LORD: my refuge and bastion
my God in whom I trust Ps.91:1 (tr. Alter)

English translations (KJV, NIV) usually flatten out the grammar of this opening verse but Robert Alter here accurately renders the abrupt change from third to first person that is very frequently met in the Psalms. The psalmists do not hesitate to make things personal. He who lies in the shadow of Shaddai will say of him: “he is my refuge, in him I trust.” But I am one of these, and I will say this of him! Again and again the psalmists preach to their own souls, and we need to learn how to do this. There is an objective reality out there that it is possible to grasp: just as much as it is possible to grasp Maxwell's Equations or Liouville's Theorem with an intellectual effort that involves bending our wills to acknowledge a reality previously unknown to us, so it is also possible to grasp the security that God freely offers us. But will we do it? Jesus weeps over Jerusalem using the same figure as the psalmist, because they would not:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, … how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Matt.23:37

With his pinions he shelters you
and beneath his wings you take refuge
a shield and buckler, his truth Ps.91:4 (tr. Alter)

Where is truth? Are we willing to acknowledge it? We have always been notoriously willing to engage in self-deception: Adam pretended he could hide from God in the garden; Cain feigned ignorance of Abel. They knew that God knew – why did they not admit it to themselves?

Alter notes that Rabbi Yair Hoffman regards this psalm as an "amulet" psalm whose recitation might help one feel God's guarding power. Well, yes, but this is not only about feeling; more important is, what is real? what is true? Feelings are ephemeral, and often chaotic and contradictory. We do need to get into touch with our feelings, but we also need to see that there is a reality underlying our feelings that commands them. What stories do we tell ourselves? How do we make sense of our feelings?

I use the phrase "making sense of our feelings" deliberately to emphasise that although feelings are precisely the impressions we get from our sense organs, they themselves must be processed further. What does it feel like? is, first, a question related to my sense of touch, but when we watch babies grow we take it for granted that their sense organs are in order and look deeper for them to start to make sense of their feelings; we say: "Oh, she

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I deliberately choose Maxwell's Equations since they have Relativity implicit in them, and Liouville's Theorem since it has implicit in it the Hamiltonian formulation of classical mechanics that carried straight over to quantum mechanics. These great physicists saw more than they knew, and so it should be for all of us. Maxwell constructed his Equations in the mid-19th century; Hertz used them to predict and then observe radio waves, Planck attacked the problem of the Ultra-Violet Catastrophe that they highlighted, and Einstein used them to establish special relativity. All of these major advances were entailed by his Equations; all were unimagined (and probably unimaginable) to Maxwell himself. Similarly, Liouville could not have imagined the use that Hamilton made of his Theorem, and subsequently the use that the fathers of Quantum Mechanics made of Hamilton's work.

It remains ironic that although these pillars of mathematical physics underlie huge sections of the modern world, one needs university level mathematics just to understand the usual notations used to write them down! They are necessary for nearly everyone, but comprehensible to nearly no-one! But even though reality is unimaginably complex, yet God provides a handle on it available to everyone!
smiled today (and it wasn't wind!).” The baby didn't just have a sense impression of her mother, she recognised her as a source of delight!

Before Jesus started his public ministry he fasted 40 days in the wilderness. Fasting is a device used to heighten perceptions, and this episode is represented in the Gospels as a struggle against Satan. Our feelings are easy to manipulate, whether by other people or by the principalities and powers. Jesus felt hungry, but he preached to the devil that life is from God. He felt invincible, but he preached to the manipulator and interpreter of his feelings that he must not attempt to manipulate the source of his life. He felt almighty, but he preached to Satan that the Almighty is not to be usurped.

It is telling that the two Evangelists that record this episode in detail both have Satan deviously using this very psalm to face Jesus with a powerful and subtle temptation, where the Psalmist intends to urge us not to be "blown this way and that by every wind of doctrine" (Eph.4:14), not to be like "tossed waves" (Jas.1:6), not to be "clouds without rain, blown by the wind" (Jude 1:12); on the contrary, to "make the Most High thy dwelling", and when in need to "call upon" him in purity of heart (vv.9,15).

Jesus has v.13 this psalm in mind when he says, "I saw Satan fall like lightening from heaven: I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions …" (Lk.10:18f); Paul refers to this saying when he tells the Romans that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom.16:20), and he physically experiences this in Malta (Acts 28:3).

This psalm is used daily by both Jews and Christians before going to bed (the latter in the Compline liturgy), and is recited seven times during Jewish burial ceremonies. Will we grasp the security of God? It is specifically when we feel insecure (facing the terrors of the night or the black abyss of death) that we need to preach to our souls. We need to be active in making sense of our feelings!
9 The psalms of the King and the reign of God

"God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should change his mind" (Num.23:19). But repentance is at the heart of our relationship with God, and it seems that God sees it this way too, responding to our change of heart with a change of mind, as in this passage of Joel where God implores us to rend our heart (sic) :-

The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble
the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining:
And the LORD shall utter his voice before his army: for his camp is very great:
for he is strong that executeth his word
for the day of the LORD is great and very terrible and who can abide it?
Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting,
and with weeping, and with mourning:
And rend your heart, and not your garments
and turn unto the LORD your God
for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness
and repenteth him of the evil …

Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly

Joel 2:10-15

There are several places where it says that "God repented" (of the evil he had in mind to do): for example when Moses pleaded with him (Num.14:12,20), when God stayed the hand of the angel of plague at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite (where the Temple would be built: 1Chron.21:15), and when he did not destroy Nineveh (Jon.3:10); in other places it says that he is persuadable (Amos 7:6; Jer.26:13).

Picking up the opening quote from Numbers 23: God is not deceitful, God is not fickle; but he does interact with us and he does allow himself to be modified by hearkening to us. He responds to our heart response, as Hosea says in a passage it is impossible to read out without a catch in the throat :-

I will betroth thee unto me for ever
I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion.
I will betroth thee unto me in faithfulness,
and thou shalt know the LORD.
‘In that day I will respond,’ declares the LORD –
‘I will respond to the skies,
and they will respond to the earth;
and the earth will respond to the grain,
the new wine and the olive oil,
and they will respond to Jezreel [God will sow].
I will plant her for myself in the land;
I will show my love to her I called “Not my loved one”.
I will say to those called “Not my people”, “Thou art my people”;
and they shall say, “Thou art my God.”’

Hos.2:19-23

Hosea understood that God wanted to husband his people; underlying that relationship is the intention of the earlier line where he puns on the idolatrous Baal worship :-

And it shall be at that day, saith the LORD, that thou shalt call me Ishi [husband]
and shalt call me no more Baali [master]

Hos.2:16

Of course, God remains God, and must be Master – God remains the King of his people! Hosea recalls Samuel, who explained to the people just this, that God was their King and they didn't need the kings that the surrounding peoples had, kings that would exploit and oppress them :-
And the LORD told him: 'Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. … Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.'

Samuel … said, ‘This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: he will take your sons … He will take your daughters … He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves …’

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. ‘No!’ they said. ‘We want a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us … and fight our battles.’

When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. The LORD answered, ‘Listen to them and give them a king.’ 1Sam.8:7-22

So God allows the people to change his mind, and Saul was anointed king, in very remarkable circumstances for which we cannot digress here. But Saul did not please God, and Samuel soon anointed David as king; Saul was jealous of David (not surprisingly!) and pursued him for much of the first book of Samuel. But David only ran from Saul, and never raised a hand against him: indeed, on two occasions refraining to attack him when he was in his power, and putting to death the man who killed Saul on the battlefield and brought David the crown looking for a reward. The twists and turns of this narrative never fail to be intriguing!

David behaved counter-intuitively, he persistently did the unexpected. He never sought power, but came to Saul's notice either as Goliath's vanquisher (1Sam.18:7) or as a cunning player on the harp (1Sam.16:16; or a sweet singer; 2Sam.23:1) – there seem to be two separate groups of texts which the ancient editors refrained from harmonising (see §6.4) and which are apparently contradictory about what happened.

However, although they are ambiguous about the course of events, the texts are unambiguous about the character of David: God considered him as "a man after his own heart" (1Sam.13:14; cp.16:7). It seems that God was persuaded by David that Kings were a good idea, and the subsequent history of both the Jews and the Christians turn on this idea of the godly King, who again and again is called Messiah (in Hebrew: Christ in Greek), that is, the anointed one.

And the Book of Psalms is David's legacy. Books I and II are almost entirely his, Book IV (which also includes two psalms signed by him) is derivative of his great psalm of thanks in 1Chron.16, there are two collections of his psalms in Book V (not counting a couple of the Songs of Ascent); even in Book III he has a psalm. The only psalm in Psalms predating David is the great psalm of Moses that opens Book IV (Ps.90), and we have already noted a number of great psalms earlier than David (not in Psalms). But there is no doubt that David changed the form. Prior to David the psalm was a sort of prophecy (see §5.3): at the time of David the psalmists (Heman, Jeduthun and the others) were called seers (1Chron.25:5; 2Chron.35:151; cp.1Sam.9:9; 1Chron.29:29); but after David it was recognised as distinct from prophecy. Psalms is the Book of the King!

Accordingly, in this final chapter we look at a series of characteristics and expected actions of the King: these tell us a great deal about God himself since the King comes from God and acts "after [God's] own heart"! The majesty of the King is illustrated by Ps.8, the blessings of the King by Ps.72, and the power of the King by Ps.29. The salvation of the King and the coming of the King are a very deep issues which Pss.80 & 110 shed some light on; and then the day of the King (Ps.118) and the judgement of the King (Ps.2) look to the future, and indeed to the very heart of God's purposes.

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1 Jeduthun here is Josiah's seer nearly 400 years after David (c.623BC), but this passage is remarkable in using the names of David's musicians: see the comment on Ps.62 (§8.3)
Finally, the *bride* of the King is the theme of the astonishing and unique Ps.45, that nevertheless has echoes all through Scripture. God really is serious about having a *relationship* with us, and this could not have been expressed in a more personal and moving way. The Bible is not a romantic book, but the reality underlying the expression of love in the Psalms is the same reality that underpins all romantic love too.

Here is the explanation of the *Son of David* that we opened this book with: Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed One – the King! – *according to the Scriptures*: in this final chapter we open out these very Scriptures, taking the Psalms as the index to them.

### 9.1 Our knowledge of the purposes of God

Many of the psalms of David were composed before he was king. But he knew that Samuel had anointed him, and in every one of his psalms it is clear that he knows that God has a plan. Our *Book of Psalms* is specifically the direct legacy of King David, who reorganised proto-Temple worship, supplying the music himself. In fact, almost half of *Psalms* is David's own and a further significant portion is from under his direct influence.

The ironic thing is that the Israelite monarchy was not an overwhelming success in political terms. The first king, Saul, led his nation to defeat; his successor, David, was militarily successful in terms of the nation's boundary but his dynasty soon lost large portions of this. Only his son, Solomon, kept David's kingdom intact: Solomon's son immediately lost the greater half of it, with the Northern Kingdom subsequently in perpetual conflict (of greater or lesser intensity) with the Davidic Southern Kingdom. It is doubly ironic that the main archaeological evidence that has survived is of King Omri of Samaria – apparently the Israelites were known to their neighbours as "Omrites"! But Omri is a brief footnote in the first book of Kings. And the Northern Kingdom was destroyed completely by the Assyrians in 722. David himself (and Solomon too) remain obscure in the archæological record.

Nevertheless, the Southern Kingdom, Judah (and hence, "Jews"), survived until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 596. The Babylonians terminated the dynasty of David, which was never persuasively restored, although memory of the Davidic blood-line persisted until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70. More important, the Jews never completely recovered their political independence, being mere pawns in the massive convulsions in the region which replaced the Babylonian overlords successively with the Medes, the Persians, the Greeks (in various flavours) and the Romans. But the people never forgot the "golden age" of David and Solomon: right down to the first Christian century the title "son of David" was a powerful political symbol.

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2 See the genealogies of Jesus (Matt.1:1; Lk.3:31); the birth of Jesus (Matt.1:20); healings of Jesus (Matt.12:23; 15:22); Jesus healing the blind man, an incident reported by all three Synoptic Evangelists (Mk.10:47f; Lk.18:38f; Matt.20:30f; cp.Matt.9:27); the opinion current then that the Messiah was the "son of David" (Mk.12:35; Matt.22:42); and the final hailing of Jesus as "son of David" in explicitly revolutionary terms, citing Ps.118 (Matt.21:9,15). We tend to read these passages today as neutral politically, but N.T.Wright has shown in his *Christian Origin* series (and particularly in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 1996) that this reading is anachronistic: healing was interpreted then as highly political.
The point is that in the traditional Jewish (and Christian) reading of *Psalms* this historical context – past, present and future – is implicit. We all read David knowing that he is speaking to us, and knowing that he knows this too! The assertion of *Psalms* is that all these worldwide political convulsions are in the hand of God: they are all foreknown by him and are part of his purposes! In fact, the psalmists see a cosmic context, and sense a cosmic significance, for all these happenings.

God is King! But the Kingdom of God had resonant exemplars in the kingdoms of David and Solomon. The primary purpose of the King is to bring Justice and Judgement, and the purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the ways the Kingdom is approached in *Psalms*.

### 9.2 The majesty of the King

Appointed in the Christian calendar as a Proper Psalm for Ascension Day, Ps.8 is an almost perfectly symmetrical hymn to Creation, the Lord of Creation and the purposes of God. Chiasms\(^3\) are very common in Hebrew poetry, but there is nowhere else such a perfect example, with identical start and end verses which I underline by numbering them symmetrically starting from zero\(^4\):

> For the lead player on the gittith, a David psalm

0 LORD our Master  
How majestic your name in all the earth

1 Whose splendour was told over the heavens

2 From the mouth of babes and sucklings  
You founded strength

3 on account of your foes  
to put an end to enemy and avenger

4 When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers  
the moon and stars you fixed firm

5 What is man that you should note him  
the son of man, that you pay him heed

6 and you make him a little less than the gods  
with glory and grandeur you crown him?

7 You make him rule over the work of your hands  
All things you set under his feet

8 Sheep and oxen all together  
and also the beasts of the field

9 birds of the heavens and fish of the sea  
what moves on the paths of the seas

10 LORD our Master  
How majestic your name in all the earth

Ps.8 (transl. Robert Alter)

If v.1c (*whose splendour was told over the heavens*) is counted as a verse then we have perfect symmetry, with vv.0&10 identical (using the slightly modified verse numbering above), vv.1&9 contrasting the heavens and the seas, vv.2&8 implying the protection

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\(^3\) A "chiastic" semantic structure is where a text can be structured in sections mirroring each other; in this case A-B-C-D-E-F-E-D-C-B-A. According to the OED, the word *chiastic* comes to us through Latin from the Greek χιαστικός (*chiasti*) "crosswise", from the Greek letter χ (*chi*). Its first use this way was in 1868 by the Biblical scholar Delitzsch commenting on the letter to the Hebrews. Note that for this Psalm the structure is doubly chiastic, in that A, C and E are parallel pairs, but B and D are contrasting pairs, with B contrasting the heavens and the seas, and D the rebellious and the obedient.

\(^4\) Of course, verse numbering is not part of the text: it was introduced by the Geneva scholars in the sixteenth century. The so-called "Geneva Bible" (1560) was a hugely influential English translation which dominated English thought for the next century – over a hundred years later when the use of the 1611 King James version was effectively enforced at the Restoration, John Bunyan still regularly used Geneva for his Biblical quotes. Geneva was the first bible to include verse numbering.
needed by both babes and sheep, vv.3&7 contrasting rebellious and obedient man, vv.4&6 mirroring the glory of the heavens by the proper glory of man, and the central v.5 being a perfect static parallelism.

The circle is complete; the work is finished: David looks back to God's Sabbath day when "he rested from all his work". This is not, like so many of the other psalms, a psalm of conflict: it is a psalm of peace. But it is not the quiet Sunday afternoon, sit with a quiet cup of tea, feet-up-and-snoozing sort of peace. No: this is the Royal peace which gives the people security to go about their business undisturbed, the peace which lets games be played and cathedrals built, which lets gardens be delighted in and oratorios sung, the peace which lets explorers follow polar bears and astronomers to wonder at the edges of the Universe; the peace which lets us live full lives!

And central to the purposes of God is man. It is necessary to emphasise that here "man" (adam) is gender-neutral. It is usual today to express this by using circumlocutions such as "mankind" (or "human creature", as Robert Alter does here in his translation of "son of man", bar-adam, in v.5), but it seems to me that this obscures the force of the Scriptural insistence on the equality of man and woman. In this sort of Creational context, "man" should always be read as "man-and-woman" following the clear intention of the first Creation account :-

\[
\text{in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them \quad Gen.1:27}
\]

In this Creation account Moses plainly intends us to understand him as gender-neutral, why else add the next verset ("male and female created he them") in parallelism? Mankind is set as ruler by God as man-and-woman: together they are the image of God. It is telling that it was the Queen of Sheba, a ruler in her own right, who came to see Solomon, as an equal, to test him with hard questions (2Chron.9:1ff). Note that the text insists that she leaves Solomon loaded with freewill gifts from him, and notice that it was in a similar context that the writer to the Hebrews glosses Abram's gifts to Melchisedek as a tribute from the lesser to the greater (Heb.7:4). Solomon and the Queen of Sheba are represented by the text as equals; man-and-woman together should seek and appreciate the glory of God.

LORD our Master, how majestic your name! The Christians sang this psalm on Ascension Day because Jesus Christ was the Son of David; David, whose enemies were put under his feet: as King David represented Israel, so the purposes of God were that the enemies of the people of God would also be put under their feet. The King brings peace – a real peace so that sheep can graze and children grow up securely – and he guarantees his peace by his power. The name of the King is sufficient to subdue the enemy, and justice belongs to the King; the avenger can lay his case before the King whose judgement is to be trusted: vengeance is mine, saith the LORD (Deut.32:35; Rom.12:19).

And then, the centre – the pinnacle – of the psalm is: what is man, that thou art mindful of him / the son of man, that thou visitest him? David repeats this question in Ps.144:3, and the poet of Job takes it up resonantly. In his second speech Job starts to lay out his case :-

\[\text{References: Gen.2:2; Ex.20:11; Heb.4:3ff; cp. John 17:4; 19:30; Rev.14:13}
\]

\[\text{6 \quad 2Sam.22:39; Ps.18:36; 1Kings 5:3; 1Cor.15:25ff; Eph.1:22; Heb.2:8}
\]

\[\text{7 \quad Pss.91:13; 47:3; Mal.4:3; Rom.16:10; Rev.12:1} \]
If only my anguish could be weighed …
It would surely outweigh the sands of the seas …
The arrows of the Almighty are in me
my spirit drinks in their poison …
Oh that I might have my request …
That God would be willing … to let loose his hand and cut me off
Then I would still have this consolation …
That I had not denied the words of the Holy One
What strength do I have, that I should still hope? …
Is my flesh bronze? …
Relent, do not be unjust
Reconsider, for my integrity is at stake
Is there any wickedness on my lips? …
Therefore I will not keep silent …
What is man, that you make so much of him …
O watcher of men
Why have you made me your target? …
Why do you not pardon my offences …
For I shall soon lie down in the dust

Job 6:2ff,8ff,29f; 7:11,17,20f

Paul commented, we wrestle not with flesh and blood but with powers and principalities (Eph.6:12), and the Prologue to Job makes it clear that in the economy of God Job was just such a wrestler: he was a man of grief, acquainted with sorrows (Is.53:3). Hosea, contemporary with Isaiah, makes a similar point about wrestling with God, referring to Jacob at Peniel, but naming Bethel in the text (Hos.12:4; cf. Gen.28:19; 32:28). After all, it is in the house of God that one ought to be able to see the face of God!

Tellingly, in Eliphaz’ second speech (in the second cycle of speeches) he also asks the question, what is man? But in this case Eliphaz is taking the same fatalist line that remains common today – nothing can be done about wickedness, about man who drinks up evil like water (Job 15:16):

What is man, that he could be pure
Or one born of woman, that he could be righteous? Job 15:14

It is interesting that Eliphaz could here be sliding towards the low view of woman that I have already insisted is un-Biblical. At the pinnacle of his hymn of praise to the God who unaccountably cares for us, David’s couplet parallels "what is man" with "son of man"; but at the centre of his attack on the motives of Job, Eliphaz denies the worth of "one born of woman", emphasising the end of his speech with the metaphor of the womb of the godless fashioning deceit (Job 15:35).8 Does he think deceit is feminine?

Against Eliphaz, again and again David asserts his own righteousness: Ps.18 (2Sam.22) is only one prominent example of many:

The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness
According to the cleanness of my hands in his sight Ps.18:24; 2Sam.22:21

Of course, this righteousness comes by the grace of God – it is not that we are sinless, but that God is able to forgive sin and put it as far from us as the east is from the west (Ps.103:12):

8 I believe that Job is late, unlikely to be as late as Plato but possibly almost contemporary with Socrates (469BC – 399BC): Ps.118 is thought to date from 444BC (see below, §9.8). Hellenic mathematics was in full swing at this time, and if Thales in the seventh century was familiar with Egyptian and Babylonian astronomy (necessary to be able to predict the lunar eclipse for which he is renowned) then certainly we should expect many and continuing contacts between the ancient civilisations. Recall also that the Jews returning from Babylon were very well educated, many of them being high ranking civil servants. We should assume that they were familiar with many schools of thought.
Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD
Though your sins be scarlet, they shall be as white as snow Is.1:18

And of course David knew this very well! Whose sin could be worse than his, with idleness, lust, covetousness, adultery, lying, stealing and betrayal culminating in murder?

Create in me a clean heart, O God
And renew a right spirit within me
Cast me not away from thy presence
And take not thy Holy Spirit from me Ps.51:10f

The King must be righteous, and so must the holy people of God. And God himself provides for our righteousness! Eliphaz is simply wrong – worse than that, he opposes the settled purpose of God to raise up a holy people for himself, a people that he brought out of misery in Egypt, a people for whom the King of kings was willing again and again to stretch forth his right hand majestic in power (Ex.15:6) and overthrow kings! And in accordance with the prophecy of Isaiah, "by his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many" (Is.53:11), God made Job justify his friends, after rebuking them for "speaking incorrectly of me" (Job 42:7,8).

This phrase at the centre of the psalm, son of man, was used like this for the first time by David. Son of David of course refers to Nathan's prophecy of God's promise to David (2Sam.7:14; 1Chron.17:13): it looks forward to the development of the purposes of God. But David is here not looking forward but looking back in wonder at the question: Why me? – the youngest of his brothers and overlooked by his father. It was not taken up again until Ezekiel uses it (93 times!). Why does Ezekiel suddenly start calling himself son of man? Crucial to understanding this is his Lament in chapter 19 :-

Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard …
… fruitful and full of branches …
Its branches were strong
fit for a ruler's sceptre …
Now it is planted in the desert
in a dry and thirsty land …
No strong branch is left on it
fit for a ruler's sceptre
This is a lament and is to be used as a lament Ez.19:10f,13f

The crown is cast into the dust (Ps.89:44): the Promise to David appears to be abrogated since Jerusalem is sacked and the Glory has departed from the Temple. Just as Jeremiah does in his electric passage on the restoration of Israel (Jer.30-33), where he looks through all the covenants of God right back to the restoration covenant with Eve, so Ezekiel goes back to David himself, taking the wider view: son of man.

Contemporary with Ezekiel, Asaph in Ps.80 speaks in similar terms :-

You brought a vine out of Egypt …
it took root and filled the land …
It sent out its boughs to the Sea
Its shoots as far as the River …
Watch over this vine
The root your right hand has planted
the son you have raised up for yourself
Your vine is cut down
it is burned with fire …
Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand
the son of man you have raised up for yourself Ps.80: 8,11,15ff
Robert Alter draws attention to how Asaph disconcertingly shifts "from the vehicle of the metaphor (the vine) to its tenor (the people of Israel)"; "son" in v.15 of course means "son of God", that is, Israel (see Deut.32:6,18f); and then "son of man" is referring to the leader of Israel – the King, except that there is now no king!

Daniel takes this up in his vision that is known to have still been resonating in the first century at the time of Jesus: "one like the son of man ... given authority, glory, and sovereign power" (Dan.7:13f). Who will the leader – the King – be, now that David's line has licked the dust? Jesus followed Ezekiel, Asaph, Daniel and David himself in calling himself son of man. He couldn't use the title "son of David" since in the first century political context this would have been deeply and explicitly subversive; in some ways son of man was even more subversive (since everyone heard the Daniel reference), but it had the advantage of being ambiguous in a way that son of David was not.9

But also, where son of David is inescapably ethnic, son of man is a term all nations can understand, and the Gospel (the Good News of the Kingdom of God) is for all nations: "a light to lighten the Gentiles" (Is.42:6; 49:6; 60:3; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23).

9.3 The blessings of the King

Ps.72 concludes Book II of psalms, and the two major collections of David's psalms, although the other Books do contain smaller collections of them. It is a Coronation Psalm for Solomon, and the remarkable thing about it is that it makes a point of praising the King in terms of the blessing he will be to his people:

He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass
   As showers that water the earth
Ps.72:6

The rain on the "mown grass" is desired by the farmers since it is needed and looked to for the next crop. It is here a symbol for abundance. We tend to forget this in the industrial world: if crops fail today it is peasants far away who starve, not we ourselves. But then there (and not so long ago here) it was everyone who went hungry.

This image is also present in the "last words of David ... the sweet singer of Israel" (2Sam:23:1) :-

The God of Israel spoke
   The Rock of Israel said to me:
   When one rules over men in righteousness
   When he rules in the fear of God
   He is like the light of morning at sunrise
   A morning without clouds
   Like the brightness after rain
   The brings the grass from the earth
   Is not my house right with God?
   For he has made me an eternal pact
   Drawn up in full and secured.
   Will he not bring to fruition my salvation
   and grant my every desire? 2Sam.23:3ff

Psalm 72 is titled, "For Solomon", following the LXX. Robert Alter supports this reading, citing David Kimchi (1160-1235) who is very clear on the coupled terms "king" and "king's son" in v.1: "This psalm was composed by David about his son Solomon". The attribution to David is surely supported by the coda to Book II ("The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended", v.20), even though this clearly applies to the Book rather than

9 I am indebted for this idea to a conversation with Martin Goldsmith at a seminar in Spring Harvest (Minehead, 2008).
specifically to the Psalm. Kirkpatrick notes that the Syriac Version (a 2nd century Christian translation) entitles it, "A Psalm of David when he had made Solomon King, and a prophecy concerning the Advent of the Messiah and the calling of the Gentiles" (although he goes on to say that this reading is "untenable" for reasons that appear to me to be spurious).10

I think it is clear that the psalm quotes the "last words" of David, and it is reasonable to assign authorship to David (despite the reluctance of scholars). If not to David, then to whom? If not for Solomon, then for whom? The drive of the psalm is so exalted, and the purported empire and renown of the King so wide that other authors and kings seem excluded. After Solomon the kingdom was torn in two and continuously immersed in strife thereafter. No other proposal seems reasonable.

The first blessing of the King is righteous judgement. We consider judgement in detail as a characteristic of the King in §9.8, including a reading of this important psalm from that point of view, but it is essential to emphasise here that judgement is presented by the psalmist as a great blessing. We usually think of judgement in terms of the Day of Judgement, doom and gloom, hellfire and terror. This sort of thinking is not Biblical. Here, righteous judgement is not only a blessing, it is the first blessing; it is not only the way the King behaves, it is the primary distinguishing characteristic of the King!

Why is this? It is because the King stands for his people against the violent and against the oppressor:

He will defend the afflicted among the people
and save the children of the needy
He will crush the oppressor! …
He will deliver the needy who cry out
the afflicted who have no-one to help
He will take pity on the weak and needy
and save the needy from death
He will rescue them from oppression and violence
For precious is their blood in his sight
Ps.72:4,12ff

Is this not what God did when he rescued his people from Egypt? And is not this thought a recurring theme subsequently for the people of God? Much later, the psalmist affirms thankfully:

You, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death
my eyes from tears
my feet from stumbling
That I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living
Ps.116:8f

and Paul quotes his next verse:

I believed, therefore I said
I am greatly afflicted
Ps.116:10; 2Cor.4:13

as a comment on his passage about being afflicted:

We are hard-pressed on every side but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed … For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake …
2Cor.4:8ff

10 The problem is that the Hebrew is ambiguous: "l-s-l-m-h" can be read in English "Of Solomon" or "For Solomon", and only the context (or tradition) can distinguish. Robert Alter usually translates "m-z-m-w-r l-d-w-d" ambiguously as "a David psalm".
so that when the psalmist a couple of verses later quotes David, "precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints" (Pss.116:5; 72:14), we understand that neither Paul and the psalmist "lose heart", but on the contrary, they "fix their eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen" (2Cor.4:16ff). They hope in God, their rescue!

Many people today believe that the Universe is a cold and uncaring place in which we briefly happen to exist, meaninglessly :-

... you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. Richard Dawkins, River out of Eden (1995)

Dawkins believes the universe is characterised by "blind, pitiless indifference", but it is important to recognise that this is a philosophical choice of his (to which he is entitled). If we believe the psalmists we will make a different choice: the raw evidence has to be interpreted by us, and we have to take responsibility for our interpretation. For every set of observations always has multiple interpretations, and no particular interpretation can be proved to be inescapable. Proof is reserved to mathematics, and even there it is limited, since the assertion that not everything that is true is provable has itself been proved (see §3.6)! Proof, when applied to our experiences, has to take a wider – a more human – meaning. It is the attitude of David, rejecting the armour of Saul because he had not proved it (1Sam.17:39). The psalmist is clear about it when he sings: "For thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us, as silver is tried" (Ps.66:10). How do we apprehend what is true?

For David, the King is not pitilessly indifferent to the welfare of his people: on the contrary, he wants them to thrive :-

May corn abound throughout the land; on the mountaintops
May his fruit rustle like Lebanon; and they of the city like the grass of the fields  Ps.72:16

This text abounds with hope – but also with textual problems! "His fruit"? Whose fruit? The context says that it is the King's fruit: that is, these crops are actually the King's. This should not be read as a throwback to the old feudal idea that everything is the king's, including the fields, the crops and even the very bodies of the peasants. Of course, this text predates feudal Europe by a couple of thousand years, not that such ideas did not exist in the ancient world. Samuel warned the people previously of such kings :-

This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: he will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plough his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. 1Sam.8:11-17

But the King is not like this! The psalm identifies the King with the people, as their representative. When Nathan, in rebuking David, says: "I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if this had been too little I would have given you even more" (2Sam.12:8), he asserts that the people are David's, yes, but held in trust for God's purposes. The king must acknowledge the sovereignty of the King. It says earlier, David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people (2Sam.8:15). "Just and right": qualities resonating with hope. Justice and righteousness: the characteristics of the King!

We must underline this insistence by the psalmists that the King's judgement is to us a blessing:
Sing to the LORD a new song …
Say among the nations: The LORD reigns …
Let all creation rejoice before the LORD
For he comes
He comes to judge the earth
He will judge the world in righteousness
The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad …
Zion hears and rejoices … because of your judgements, LORD
Sing to the LORD a new song …
Let the sea resound and everything in it
the world and all who live in it …
Let them sing before the LORD
For he comes to judge the earth
Praise the LORD, O my soul …
The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed ..
The LORD has established his throne in heaven
and his kingdom rules over all
Ps.96:1,10,13
Ps.97:1,8
Ps.98:1,7,9
Ps.103:1,6,19

And so, returning to Ps.72 and the earthly King who reflects the heavenly one, David looks to the future, in bright hope :-

May his name be forever
As long as the sun may his name bear seed
And may all nations be blessed through him
Call him happy
Ps.72: 17

For this earthly King embodies the very promises of God: "Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me, your throne shall be established forever" (2Sam.7:16); a thousand years later Jesus was still being called "son of David"! 11 And the Christians gave Jesus the title "Christ" – the anointed one, that is, the King. 12 When David says, "As long as the sun endures" (vv.5, 17) he explicitly invokes the Creation covenant :-

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: … And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good.
Gen.1:14-18

The sun and the moon are God's regents, to keep time and to rule it. They separate light from darkness, and there is no darkness but God's light shines in it. The sun and moon are earnest of the hope of God, as Jeremiah says explicitly: "He who appoints the sun to shine by day … [the] moon and stars to shine by night [declares:] … Only if these decrees vanish from my sight will the descendent of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me" (Jer.31:35f). And David explicitly links this Covenant promise of God with life itself :-

The heavens declare the glory of God …
The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring to life
Ps.19:1,7

Then, finally, the purview of the psalmist extends, not only to the end of time, but to the ends of the world: the blessings of the King not only to his own nation but to all nations! This is truly astonishing: surely this is merely the hyperbole one expects from court poetry? This is what the scholars regularly suggest; however, I am sure they are mistaken! Of course it is true that courtiers are expected to be sycophantic, and plenty of

12 David repeatedly referred to Saul (and himself) as "the LORD's anointed" (1Sam.10:1; 12:3; 16:13;
24:10; 26:9,23; 2Sam.1:16; 2:7)
evidence can be adduced for this from the ancient world as well. Strangely, however, I can find no such example in the Biblical text, unless one counts the formula "O King, live for ever!" The Biblical authors are very disciplined and never indulge in unduly exaggerated language.

On the contrary, this promise to the whole world is a constant refrain of the Biblical text. God assures the serpent that Eve's offspring will bruise his head (Gen.3:15), and "Eve" etymologically is "mother of all living" (Gen.3:20). God's first promise to Abram was that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen.12:3), his last promise was the same: "through your seed, all nations on earth will be blessed" (Gen.22:18); and in between, when promising Sarah a child, he said the same:

Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him

He promised the same to Isaac: "through your seed, all nations on earth will be blessed" (Gen.26:4) and Paul also emphasises this text (Gal.3:8).

Isaiah prophesies a blessing for the whole world extraordinary even in Biblical terms — the death of death:

On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples
The sheet that covers all nations
He will destroy death forever

and later he asserts that "my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Is.56:7), a promise that Jesus refers to trenchantly (Mk.11:17). Isaiah also promised that the Servant of the LORD would be a "light to the Gentiles" (Is.42:6; 49:6; 60:3), and he was quoted by both Zechariah (Luke 2:32) and Paul (Acts 13:47; 26:23).

Jeremiah says this:

At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the LORD; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem: neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart

and directly afterwards he says:

If you return to me — declares the LORD … and swear, "as the LORD lives" in sincerity, justice and righteousness
Nations shall bless themselves by you

and note how here Jeremiah links the blessing promised to Abraham and Isaac to judgement and justice, just as David does in Ps.72.

The promise to Abraham is remembered several times by the psalmists, both by David (Ps.22:27; 86:9) and others (Ps.67:2; 117:1); also being the main point of the shortest psalm in the book (Ps.117).

The blessing of the King is universal, for the whole world: this is why the early church used this psalm as the special psalm for the Epiphany, when the Magi came from the nations as a symbol of the nations giving homage to the King. Kirkpatrick also tells us:

[Ps.72] was a favourite psalm of St. Edmund, the martyr king of East Anglia, who spent a year in retirement that he might learn the Psalter by heart, so as to be able to repeat it in his intervals of leisure. Its kingly ideal seems to have moulded his life.

13 1Kings 1:31; Neh.2:3; Dan.2:4; 5:10; 6:6,21
9.4 The power of the King

Many psalms might be chosen as examples of the expression of the power of God: "You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked ... you have uprooted their cities" (Ps.9:5f); or "Our God comes and will not be silent / A fire devours before him / and around him a tempest rages" (Ps.50:3). But I have selected Ps.29 since it is composed in such an arresting form:—

Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of God  
Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength  
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to his name  
Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness

Pss.29:1f; 96:7ff; 1Chron.16:28f; (beauty of holiness: 2Chron.20:21; Ps.110:3)

This opening is a direct, almost verbatim, quote from David's psalm of thanks when the Ark came to Jerusalem, itself quoted at length in Book IV. Kirkpatrick and Robert Alter agree that "Sons of God" is the best reading of beney 'elim (this phrase is also used in Ps.89:6), which could be rendered "mighty ones" (KJV, RV, NIV) or "sons of the gods" (equivalently "divine beings" of JPS). Kirkpatrick explains that it is a "doubly formed plural of ben el", usually given as beney 'elohim (as in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7), and definitely means "angels". Alter's comment is more complex, but very interesting historically:—

They are best thought of as the flickering afterlife of a polytheistic mythology – God's royal entourage on high, His familia, as Rashi [1040-1104] called them, invoking a Latin term that had entered Hebrew during the time of the Roman empire. 


Alter does not believe that David was really polytheistic in any way, he explained previously that this was a literary influence of the surrounding Canaanite poetry, similar to the influence of Homer on Milton (see §3.4).

Ascribe here renders the Hebrew y-h-b, which is "a relatively rare synonym" (though the standard term in Aramaic) for the more common n-t-n" (Alter). This wording (of the NIV) is influenced by KJV:—

KJV also renders this word as "ascribe" in the important passage at Deut.32:3. The Hebrew word has no implication of writing of course; these ancient poems were certainly composed, not written, as were Homer's.

KJV renders the Hebrew word as "give" at Gen.29:21; 30:1; 47:15f; Jos.18:4; Jud.1:15; 20:7; 1Sam.14:41; Ps.108:12; Prov.30:15 (twice); Hos.4:18; Zec.11:12; apart from the three passages already cited (15 passages).


KJV renders the word as "come on" (or "come forth") at Ex.10:1; Deut.28:2; Jud.3:5; Job 23:10; and as "go to" at Gen.11:3f; 7:18; 38:16; (1Kin.22:48?) 2Kin.5:5; Eccl.2:1; and as "set" (or "beset") at Gen.18:8; 43:9; Ex.28:11; 37:3; 40:4f,20; Deut.26:10; 30:1,19; Jos.4:7; Jud.19:22; 20:5; 1Sam.6:18; 2Sam.11:15; 12:30; 14:31; 1Kin.5:5; 6:19,27; 7:39; 10:9; 12:4; 1Chron.9:22,31; 20:2; 22:19; 29:3; 2Chron.3:5; 4:7; 6:10; 9:8; 13:11; 17:2; 19:5; 20:22; 23:10,14; 31:3; Ezr.3:8,10; Neh.1:9; Esther 2:17; (Ps.62:10?) Song 5:14; 8:6; Is.49:22; 57:8; Jer.31:30; 50:2; Ez.18:2; 37:1; 40:2,4; Dan.3:1,5,7,12,14,18f; 10:12; Hos.8:4; Joel 2:5; Zech.6:11; 8:10 (59 passages).

KJV renders the word as "take" at Gen.7:2; 21:30; 22:2; 33:11; Ex.12:4,7; 25:3,15; 28:5; 29:5;
Ascribe greatness to our God the Rock
His work is perfect and all his ways are just
A God of truth and without iniquity
Just and right is he

Deut.32:4 (emphatic pronoun indicated)

The word used (y-h-b) seems to be an archaism, occurring predominantly in the older texts (mostly prior to David). The exceptions are interesting: the prophets use the word for "give" both emphatically and imperatively: *Shame is the "gift"* (Hos.4:18); *Give me my price* (Zech.11:12). This Hosea text is hard to render precisely in English; KJV gives the literal reading: *[Ephraim's] rulers with shame do love, Give ye!* And the context for Zechariah is the foolish shepherd, the annulments of the covenants and the thirty shekels of silver. The vast majority of the times the word is used, it is used emphatically in some way, often deliberately using exalted or archaic language; and usually with reference to the things of God. For such a common word, only 266 passages is a surprisingly low count (see footnote).

I have given the suggestive reading "... *in the beauty of holiness*": this is not quite right, but modern ears do not hear the worship implicit in the literal reading: "... *in holy majesty*"; a worship implied each of the five the times this phrase is repeated. Worship and power belong together when we are speaking of the greatness of God!

This very long and detailed introduction to this psalm is intended to show how great God is to David: he uses the most exalted language available, together with a rhetorical repetition (*Ascribe ... ascribe ... ascribe / glory ... glory*) that heightens the effect even further. He refers to the honour given to God even by the angels (*sons of God*), and the worship due from us as we consider the majesty of his holiness.

In the psalm we speak of God three times (*Ascribe ...*), but God speaks seven times (*The LORD's voice ...*) :-

The LORD's voice is over the waters
The God of glory thunders
The LORD is over the mighty waters
The LORD's voice in power
The LORD's voice in majesty
The LORD's voice breaking cedars
The LORD shatters the Lebanon cedars
and he makes Lebanon dance like a calf
Sirion like a young wild ox
The LORD's voice hew flames of fire
The LORD's voice makes the wilderness shake
The LORD makes the Kadesh wilderness shake
The LORD's voice brings on the birth pangs of does
and lays bare the forests
And in his palace all says glory
The LORD was enthroned at the flood
and the LORD is enthroned as king for all time

Ps.29:3-10

---

Again, this rhetorical repetition gives the psalm an extraordinary intensity. David is intent on explaining to us the astonishing power of God. All the images he uses are calculated for this. First, the waters … the mighty waters. "Waters" to the ancient mind invoked the ungovernable tumult of the sea – it invoked primeval chaos! When Jesus said to the sea, Peace, be still (Mk.4:39), in the minds of his disciples he was exerting the power of God over chaos itself! It is very notable that in the Creation account there is no hint of the power struggle that is ubiquitous in the pagan creation myths. The presence of chaos is acknowledged:

darkness was upon the face of the deep
and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters

Gen.1:2

and the second Day, when God divided the waters above from the waters below, he did not call "good": at no time is God not sovereign! Jesus commented that:

a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand"

Matt.12:25f; Mk.3:24; Lk.11:17f

and I think that he was referring to the second Day of Creation. And at the Exodus, God divided the sea, also referring to the Creation and reiterating that his power is unchallengeable.15

In Canaanite myth, creation is effected through the conquest of a primordial sea monster by the god who rules the land. But the Hebrew Creation story explicitly has God ruling land and sea; in fact, revealing the land by gathering the seas into their place. And there is no struggle: the sea simply obeys him.

The cedars of Lebanon were the epitome of majestic strength, the great emblem of proud loftiness: the skilled tree-fellers of Lebanon could master these trees to cut them down (2Chron.2:8; Ez.3:7; Is.14:8; Ez.27:5); cedars could proverbially resist the raw strength of nature, but they cannot resist the thunder of God! And the LORD's voice hewing flames of fire refers cleverly to lightning in terms of tree-felling. Syrion is the old Sidonian name for Mount Hermon (Deut.3:9), and the dancing of both Lebanon and Syrion here refer to the mountains of the northern border of Israel. God can even make the mountains dance (cf. Ps.114:4,6)! The wilderness of Kadesh is as far south as Hermon is far north: it is the eastern part of the Sinai desert bordering Edom (Num.20:16), and shaking the desert, like dancing mountains, refers to earthquakes (Num.16:30ff). What sort of storm can "strip the forest bare", what sort of terror induces birth-pangs of the does? If heaven is my [God's] throne, and the earth is my footstool (Is.66:1) what is God's palace but everything that is? And all speaks glory! In this psalm David has us speaking glory of God, God himself speaking gloriously; indeed, all that is speaking glory of him!

Finally, we have God revealed as the King, who was and who is forever. All judgement is his: he was enthroned at the Flood and he remains enthroned forever (see also Ps.10:16). This King, how does he see us?

May the LORD give strength to his people
May the LORD bless his people with peace

Ps.29:11

He whose strength surpasses all gives strength to us! He whose glory exceeds telling, stoops to give peace to us! Kirkpatrick comments:

For his own people [God] is not the God of terror; for them all ends in peace. This closing word, "With peace" is like a rainbow arch over the psalm. The beginning of the psalm shows heaven open, and the throne of God in the midst of the angelic songs of praise; while its close shows us his victorious people upon earth, blessed with peace … Gloria in excelsis [glory in the highest] is the beginning, and pax in terris [peace on earth] the end.

15 Ex.14:16,21; Neh.9:11; Job 26:12; Pss.74:13; 136:13; Is.51:15; Jer.31:35
Ps.29 is appointed as one of the psalms for Trinity Sunday, accompanied by the readings about the living creatures with six wings who cry: *Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD Almighty* … (Is.6:1-8; Rev.4). This is because God's holiness would not be awesome unless He was Almighty, and this is where knowledge of the One God starts.

### 9.5 The salvation of the King

God looks on the heart, and his salvation has always been primarily of the heart. Adam was thrown out of Eden for rebellion – a sin of the heart; Noah and Lot were saved because God reckoned them "righteous", and Abraham was reckoned righteous because he believed God.

*Salvation* is a 3-syllable word with a Latin root which William Tyndale regularly treated as a synonym of *health*, a monosyllabic word with a German root. This frequently sounds joltingly strange to us, as in the Song of Zechariah:

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Blessed be the lord of Israel
For he hath visited and redeemed his people
And hath set up the horn of health unto us
In the houle of his servant David
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Luke 1:69; transl. Wm. Tyndale (1526)\(^{16}\)

Of course, Zechariah expects God to also "*save us from our enemies / and from the hands of all that hate us*", but God never deals with us only on a physical level: it always goes deeper. "*We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers*" as Paul exclaims (Eph.6:12). So when Moses was contending against Pharaoh, it was an issue of the *heart*; it says six times that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but God hardened Pharaoh's heart only three times: including finally, as a terrible judgement; we are necessarily constrained by our previous choices. The Exodus was of course a great physical triumph – *The horse and its rider he has cast into the sea!* (Ex.15:1,21) – but it is the spiritual force of the narrative that is remarkable.

*Salvation* is our *health*: we remember this in English when we speak of *eye-salve*. Salvation is our well-being at the deepest level – which of course also encompasses the physical. Paul's martial expression of this is startlingly rendered by Tyndale, as in the passage cited previously:

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For this cause take unto you the armoure off god … Above all take to you the helde off fayth … and take the helmet off healty and the fwarede of the iprete which is the worde of god
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Eph.6:11,16f; transl. Wm. Tyndale (1526)

The *helmet of health*, the *horn of health* – of course Tyndale was enticed by the alliteration, but he always chose his words very carefully; mindful of his peril, he took enormous care to give a translation defensible as a literal rendering of the Greek text.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{16}\) I have reproduced the spelling of the 1526 book. This was essentially the first book in modern English, and at that time (and for a long time after) spelling was not regular. The book is printed using the "blackletter" font, with some interesting orthography, including the long "s" which I have reproduced here. The 1560 Geneva Bible was printed in a very clear modern Roman font, but the 1611 King James Version reverted to blackletter in a self-conscious effort to be archaic.

\(^{17}\) The New Testament in the KJV (1611) is about 80% Tyndale. The revision of Geneva (1560) was very influential – the Geneva Bible (which included the Old Testament) was the primary English translation until the Restoration (1660) – but Geneva largely adopted Tyndale's English, which has dominated our language ever since. And a large number of the departures of KJV from Tyndale were in the direction of making the English less immediate and more comfortable – fitting better into traditional religious categories; "charity" instead of "love", "salvation" instead of "health" (although Geneva had already made this change), "church" instead of "congregation" etc.
"Salvation" is not to be spiritualised away, it is an honest-to-goodness idea understandable by everyone since anyone can grasp what "health" is!

The Lord brings salvation because he is the God that saves! So for David, in his song of triumph, salvation could just as well be translated rescue (as Robert Alter consistently does for this psalm):

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer …
He is my shield, and the horn of my salvation,¹⁸ my stronghold
I call to the LORD who is worthy of praise
And I am saved from my enemies …
He reached down from on high and took hold of me …
He rescued me because he delighted in me …
He gives his king great victories
he shows unfailing kindness to his anointed
to David and his seed forever

Ps.18:2f,16,19,50; 2Sam.22:3f,17,20,51

David frequently calls God King, or (equivalently) says he is enthroned,¹⁹ and we could pick many of his psalms to study in detail the characteristic salvation of the King. But we will instead consider a later psalm, of Asaph, who makes the rescue (salvation) of God his refrain:

For the lead player on the shoshanim, an eduth, an Asaph psalm
Shepherd of Israel, hearken
He who drives Joseph like sheep
enthroned on the cherubim, shine forth
Before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh
rouse your might
and come to the rescue for us
O God, turn us
and light up your face that we may be rescued

Ps.80:1-3 (transl. Robert Alter ibid.)²⁰

The King (the enthroned Shepherd) can rescue us! But will he? And if not, why not?

First the superscription. NIV translates shoshanim, eduth as "Lilies of the Covenant": this ties in with the comment of Alter that "the general meaning of this Hebrew term [eduth] is 'precept', 'pact', or 'treaty obligation'." Lilies are a classical symbol of love²¹ so that such a tune is evoking the covenant love of God! This is underlined by the refrain (vv.3,7,19) which refers to the Aaronic blessing of the congregation :-

The LORD bless thee and keep thee
The LORD make his face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee
The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee
And give thee peace

Num.6:24ff

"Make his face shine" and "light up your face" both use the same Hebrew word ṥôwr²² which is the word regularly used to translate "light" (Gen.1:3 et passim), with the plural form Urim referring to the brilliance of the jewels in the High Priest's breastplate.

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¹⁸ It is worth pointing out that Luke uses the same phrase for horn of salvation (κερας σωτηριας, keras soterias) that the LXX uses for the same phrase in Ps.19. Zechariah's language was conditioned by Psalms. Of course, it is a little more complex than that. Zecharias (the Greek rendering of his name) probably prophesied in Aramaic, and Luke was writing in Greek. But Luke, in reporting Zecharias, recognised the quotation from Psalms and used the wording of the LXX to translate it.

¹⁹ David explicitly calls God King in Pss.5:2; 10:16; 24:7,8,9,10; 29:10; 68:24; 145:1; and says he is enthroned in Pss.9:4,7; 22:3; 29:10; 55:19.

²⁰ amending Alter's text using Michael Wilcock's "Turn" for Alter's "bring us back" (see §7.3 n.8)

²¹ see Song 2:1f,16; 4:5; 5:13; 6:2f; 7:2

²² Strong's Concordance (for KJV) lists four different vocalisations of ṣôwr [תו] and several derivatives of this important word. It is usually translated "light" (10 times in Gen.1; in Ex., 11; in Lev., 1; in Num.,
Shepherd of Israel is a resonant name of God, first used by Israel blessing his sons on his deathbed:

Joseph is a fruitful vine
a fruitful vine near a spring
whose branches climb over a wall
With bitterness archers attacked him
they shot at him with hostility
But his bow remained steady
his strong arm remained supple
Because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob
Because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel
Gen.49:22ff

This name was also implied by the prophet Micaiah in his oracle against Ahab, recorded in a prose passage that, in its economy of means, reads almost like poetry: -

When he arrived the king asked him: Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain? Attack and be victorious, he answered, for the LORD will give it into the king's hand. The king said to him: How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but truth in the name of the LORD?
Then Micaiah answered: I saw all Israel scattered on the hills, like sheep without a shepherd, and the LORD said, "These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace."
1Kings 22:14-17; 2Chron.18:14-16 (900BC)

The way the passage continues is startling, but would lead us too far from our present purpose. The logic of this prophecy to Ahab is as follows: the king should shepherd his people, as David did (2Sam.5:2; 24:17; 1Chron.11:2; 21:17), and as all the leaders of Israel ought to have done (2Sam.7:7; 1Chron.17:6). But God is King of kings, and will himself shepherd the shepherds (Ps.23:1), and judge them (Ez.34:2), and in the end shepherd his people himself (Amos 3:12; Jer.31:10).

When is the psalmist of Ps.80 singing? The later verses require it to be late, apparently Exilic: "why hast thou broken down her walls? … [the branch is] burnt with fire, cut down" (Ps.80:12,16). But the Septuagint includes, "concerning the Assyrians" in its superscription for this psalm which suggests that the ancient editors thought it was 8th century rather than 6th century.

The last three references to the Shepherd (Ezekiel, Amos & Jeremiah) are also late, with both Jeremiah and Ezekiel commenting on the fall of Jerusalem (in 587BC) and Amos commenting on the earlier fall of Samaria to the Assyrians (722BC). Why does the psalmist make a point of referring to Ephraim (the usual name for the Northern kingdom that fell to the Assyrians in 722BC: Ps.80:2)? Why does the LXX refer to the Assyrians? Is Ps.80 contemporary with Amos or Jeremiah?

I think the answer is very interesting, and is a good example of the complex allusiveness of the psalmists. Jacob loved Rachel (Gen.29:18,30), Joseph and Benjamin were Rachel's sons, and Ephraim and Manessah were Joseph's sons. Jeremiah also refers to Rachel: -

Rachel weeping for her sons
and refusing to be comforted for her sons
because they are not
Jer.31:15

3; in Jud., 1; in Sam., 9; in Kings, 2; in Neh. & Ez., 3; in Est., 1; in Job, 29; in Ps., 30; in Prov. & Eccl., 9; in Is., 27; in Jer. & Lam., 5; in Ez., 1; in Hos., 1; in Amos., 2; in Mic., 3; in Hab., 2; in Zeph., 1; in Zech., 2). KJV also renders it variously as break of day (2Sam.2:22; also Gen.44:3), glorious (Ps.76:4), kindle (Mal.1:10), fire (Is.27:11; 31:9; 44:16; 47:14; Ez.5:2), shine (Num.6:25; Job 41:32; Pss.31:16; 67:1; 80:3,7,19; 119:135; Eccl.8:1; Is.60:1; Dan.9:17), bright (Job 37:11), clear (Am.8:9), day (2Sam.2:32; Job 26:10), morning (Neh.8:3), sun (Job 31:26), herb (2Kin.4:39; Is.18:4; 26:19); and Urim (Ex.28:30; Lev.8:8; Num.27:21; Deut.33:8; 1Sam.28:6; Ezra 2:63; Neh.7:64)
and he says earlier that "Ephraim is my firstborn son" (Jer.31:9), referring to Gen.48:19. Now, for Jeremiah, "Joseph" (Ephraim & Manessah) represented the Northern Kingdom, which was lost 150 years earlier, but "Benjamin" was a part of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, under threat from the Babylonians.

This whole passage is extraordinarily intense, and is about restoration. So far as Jeremiah could see, Judah & Israel (the Southern and Northern Kingdoms) were in the same boat: Israel was already destroyed, and Judah would be shortly. So he laments, "Rachel weeping for her sons." But then he says: -

Thus saith the LORD: Restrain thy voice from weeping …
They shall return from the enemy's land …
Thy children shall return to their country …
Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to me!

He speaks of the restoration of both Judah and Ephraim! This is underlined when he says, "I awoke and looked about, and my dream had been pleasant to me" (Jer.31:26). He had been dreaming! It is as if he sees that to speak of the restoration of Ephraim is to speak of the impossible, since it was known that they were already assimilated, already indistinguishable from the nations. But what if the nations all came to worship the LORD? Isaiah saw just this when he prophesied that Israel would be "a light to the gentiles" (Is.42:6; 49:6; 60:3), and Zechariah saw it when he prophesied that all the nations will go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech.14:16). Joel prophesied God saying: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh" (Joel 2:28), which Peter quoted at Pentecost (Acts 2:17) specifically to welcome the non-Jews; he also says, "whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be saved" (Joel 2:32) which Paul quotes after saying, "there is no difference between Jew and Gentile" (Rom 10:12f). I think it is clear that Joel is later than Jeremiah23 so that all of these prophets are relying on this dream of Jeremiah.

So, the psalmist is asking for the impossible when he asks God to rescue Joseph, just as Jeremiah recognises that his dream of the restoration of Ephraim is impossible. But then, the verse just quoted from Joel goes on to say, "for there shall be a remnant" (Joel 2:32), and Benjamin was already just such a remnant; David had called them the little tribe of Benjamin (Ps.68:27) because of a previous disaster.24 God always keeps a remnant for himself, as he said to Elijah (1Kings 19:18; Rom.11:4) and as he said to Hezekiah :-

Once more, a remnant of the kingdom of Judah
will take root below and bear fruit above
For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant
and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors
The zeal of the LORD of Hosts will accomplish this

and all the later prophets spoke many times of the remnant of Israel,25 in particular Isaiah :-

23 It used to be fashionable to place Joel as approximately contemporary with Isaiah, but it seems to me that he quotes the other prophets including Ezekiel, Zephaniah, and Malachi who are all late. Unlike most of the other prophets, Joel does not date himself.

24 see Jud.21:17 and the whole extraordinarily unpleasant passage. A Benjamite did a very wicked thing, but all his family stood by him and wouldn't give him up to justice, so Israel turned on Benjamin in a civil war and very nearly destroyed them completely. When Scripture speaks of remnant, it (at least partly) has this nasty episode in view.

25 On the remnant, see: Ezra 9:8,14; Is.1:9; 10:20ff; 11:11,16; 37:32; 46:3; Jer.23:3; 31:7; Ez.6:8; 14:22; Joel 2:32; Amos 5:15; Mic.2:12; 4:7; 5:3,7f; Zech.8:11f
In that day the remnant of Israel
the survivors of Jacob …
Will truly rely on the LORD
the Holy One of Israel
A remnant will return
a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God
Though your people be like the sand of the sea, O Israel
only a remnant shall return …
A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse
From his roots a Branch will bear fruit

Is.10:20ff; 11:1; cp. Rom.9:27ff; 11:5 et passim

Therefore, when Asaph speaks of Benjamin he is referring to the remnant of Israel and God's promises; when he speaks of Ephraim he is asserting that nothing is too hard for God (Jer.32:17; Luke 1:37; cp. Matt.17:20) and against hope believing in hope (Rom.4:18!)

You carried a vine out of Egypt
you drove away nations and planted it
You cleared space before it
and struck its roots down
and it filled the land

Ps.80:8f

The vine is another reference to Joseph, as we have already seen (Gen.49:22; and note that Joseph himself was carried out of Egypt, see Gen.50:25; Ex.13:19). The first thing to say is that the vine is a symbol of the peace and plenty of the last days, the consequence of righteousness when :-

He will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths …
Everyone will sit under his own vine and under his own fig-tree
and no one will make them afraid
for the LORD Almighty has spoken

Mic.4:2,4; Zech.3:10; see also Is.65:21; Jer.31:5

It was these Scriptures to which Jesus was referring when he said to Nathaniel, "I saw you under the fig tree" (John 1:47f). The last days! In that day, Isaiah sings about God's restoration as a fruitful vineyard (Is.27:2) in the conclusion of his great prophesy of the salvation of the God who will raise the dead (Is.26:19) and who intends to destroy death itself (Is.25:7) :-

… Jacob will take root
Israel will bud and blossom
and fill all the world with fruit

Is.27:6

But Isaiah also sings a more terrible song about a vineyard (Is.5:1-7); about the shame of wickedness and the judgement of God (see also Matt.21:33 et passim). For Israel is God's vineyard: he looks for good fruit but finds only bad! Contemporary with Isaiah, Hosea also uses the same image of a vineyard gone wild: Israel is a spreading vine, fruiting only to himself (Hos.10:1), and much later Ezekiel also speaks of a low spreading vine in his riddle about the two eagles (Ez.17:6). Jeremiah accuses Judah, saying that God had planted them a choice vine of sound and reliable stock (Jer.2:21) but they prostituted themselves under every spreading tree (Jer.2:20). It is the unpruned vine that spreads along the ground, abounding in foliage but with little and poor fruit. What use is such a plant? Ezekiel sarcastically comments that a vine that produces no fruit is good for nothing (Ez.15:2), and then takes up a haunting lament over the destruction of the vineyard (Ez.19:10ff) as a figure of the ruin of Israel.

So when Asaph sings of God carrying a vine out of Egypt :-

… the stock your right hand planted
and the son you took to yourself

Ps.80:15
he has all these prophets in mind, and particularly (at this point) Hosea saying, *out of Egypt I called my son* (Hos.11:1). For of course, it is Israel that is God's son, his *firstborn son* (Ex.4:22,23), and when Matthew cites the prophecy of Hosea (Matt.2:15) of course he is aware of this, deliberately referring to Jesus as personifying the new "Israel" in a way entirely consistent with the old prophets.

When Asaph speaks of *the man on your right, the son of man you took to yourself* (Ps.80:17), he is using Ezekiel's phrase *son of man*, referring to Ezekiel's extended allegories of the judgement of Judah that opens the book (chs. 4 & 5). The phrase *son of man* has long been debated: I read it as a reference to the Prophet (Deut.18:18), or Abraham's "seed" (Gen.12:7; 13:15; 24:7; a singular word, as Paul points out; Gal.3:16).

*Son of David* looks forward to the final fulfilment of the promise to David, which David understood as being not just for himself personally, but for him as personifying Israel, as the king under whom God would bring *Salvation* to Israel. *Son of man* also looks forward to the final fulfilment of the promise not only to David but to Abraham and Noah and Eve as well: now God's king was coming to bring *Salvation* not only to Israel, but to the whole world through Israel! The King is to bring not only a mere local help for a handful in a little corner of the Middle East, but a truly cosmic rescue of *all you nations* (Ps.117:1). This is because :-

The LORD is near to all who call on him  
To all who call on him in truth

Ps.145:18

9.6 The coming of the King

The LORD said to my lord  
Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a stool for your feet

Ps.110:1

Psalm 110 is famous for being quoted in the New Testament in heavily Christological contexts; indeed, it is (very properly) a Proper Psalm for Christmas Day. Christians have always read this psalm as pointing clearly to Christ the King. First Jesus cites it in hot debate with the Jewish leaders days before Good Friday (Matt.22:44, Mk.12:36, Lk.20:42); then Peter cites it in his speech at Pentecost (Acts 2:34); then the writer the Hebrews both cites the first verse again (Heb.1:13), and makes extensive use of the reference to Melchizedek (in chs. 5:6ff, 6:20, 7:1ff *passim*). The language here of "sitting at the right hand" of God is picked up by Jesus at his trial before the High Priest, as reported by all three synoptic Evangelists (Matt.26:64; Mk.14:62; Lk.22:69): that this was understood as an explicit Messianic claim is demonstrated by the response of Caiaphas.26

The commentators point out that this opening (usually rendered as: *The LORD said to my Lord* where the second "Lord" is capitalised) is not in itself explicitly Christological in traditional Christian terms since "Lord" renders not the Hebrew *'adonai* (the plural invariably used for God and capitalised in English) but *'adoni* (a singular word usually rendered *lord* or *master* and not capitalised).27 The question is whether the superscription

26 On "sitting at the right hand" of God, see also: Acts 5:31; 7:55f; Rom.8:34; Eph.1:20; Col.3:1; 1Pet.3:22;

27 That is, *this is not* a proof text for the assertion "Christ is God", an assertion which appears as such in such a bald form neither in the Bible itself, nor (surprisingly) in the later Trinitarian Creeds. Indeed, the Creeds avoid such bald statements: and the fourth century development of the doctrine of the Trinity also used very careful language, language which was forgotten by the time of the irruption of Islam with the baleful result that the Muslims have always considered Christians to be near-polytheists. Trinitarian doctrine rests not on single texts, but on many texts considered together.
("A David psalm") indicates that the psalm is by David (in which case "lord" indicates the Son of David prophesied by Nathan: see 2Sam.7:14 and 1Chron.17:13) or for David (in which case "lord" indicates David himself). The New Testament references are not an historical proof that David composed the psalm, for all that they do prove that a thousand years later not only Jesus but also everyone else thought that he had: few scholars today believe that David composed this psalm. Indeed, it used to be the fashion, because of the reference to Melchizedek, to consider that the psalm in fact dates from the Maccabean period, addressed either to Jonathan Maccabee (made both king and high priest by Alexander Balas c.153BC, see 1Macc.10:20) or Simon a decade later (see 1Macc.14:35, 38, 41); no scholars today support this view since it is established that Psalms long predates the Maccabees. In any case, the Maccabees were considered by a large minority inn the first century as having ultimately failed to keep out Greek practises and therefore their adoption of the titles of both king and high priest was not a welcome innovation. The Son of David was not then supposed to be a priest!

But the reference in the psalm to Melchizedek is strange, and unique in the Hebrew Scriptures (apart from the original reference at Gen.14:18). Of course, it can be argued that in this psalm there is no personal reference to Melchizedek, King of Salem: it can be translated :-

The LORD has sworn, He will not change heart,
"You are priest forever
By my solemn word, my righteous king"
Ps.110:4 (transl. Robert Alter)

But although it undermines the interpretation of the writer to the Hebrews, this wording does not get over the basic problem that in the Mosaic Covenant the offices of King and High Priest were very clearly distinguished. And if this is a Davidic psalm as all the ancient authorities believed (whether by or for David) it seems to me that the personal reference to Melchizedek himself must have been intended by the poet.28 Jerusalem was David's city, which he took from the Jebusites (1Chron.11:5ff), what poet could resist some mention of the King of Salem? There are many hints in the later prophets of a replacement to come of the Mosaic Covenant, which even Moses himself points to when he says that in times to come circumcision will be of the heart (Deut.30:6). I think that the textual evidence for the poet being David himself is strong since this verse can only coherently be read as a Davidic hint of the New Covenant to come (provided that the reference to "Melchisedek" is intended). The interpretation by the writer to the Hebrews of the meaning of the poet is textually permissible, for all that David could not then have put it in those terms.

This has always been a puzzling psalm. Although the opening verse is textually plain it is theologically veiled: N.T.Wright has shown in detail how in the first century the ideas of "Son of David" and "Messiah" did not coincide, and a wide variety of views were held of what these ideas meant;29 Jesus' question to the Pharisees is a good indicator of this underlying debate. And very rapidly the poem becomes textually cryptic: we have already considered the surprising and textually ambiguous reference to Melchizedek, but the preceding verse reads :-

28 I think Robert Alter is right when he comments, "This could be a proper noun, Malchizedek (sic), or a punning reference to that name." JPS has "The LORD has sworn and will not relent / 'You are a priest forever, a rightful king by my decree','" giving the marginal reading: "The LORD has sworn and will not relent / 'You are a priest forever, after the manner of Melchisedek' ."

Your people rally to battle
on the day your force assembles
on the holy mountains, from the womb of dawn
yours is the dew of your youth
Ps.110:3 (transl. Robert Alter)

Your people acts-of-volunteering
on the day of your force
holy majesties, from the womb of dawn
yours is the dew of your youth
Ps.110:3 (literal rendering by Robert Alter)

In the first line the battle is inferred in a standard ellipsis (familiar from the Song of Deborah, Jud.5:9, and recall that this Song was important for David who cited it extensively in his Ps.68); in the second the Hebrew is also elliptical, with assembles being inferred.\(^{31}\)

I think that Milton's commentary on this verse is the most illuminating. He says:

An host
Innumerable as the stars of night
Or stars of morning, dewdrops, which the sun
Impearls on every leaf and every flower

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667) 5:744

The morning is the mother of the dew, covering the mountains that are so important for Israel; dew, so precious in hot Eastern countries. David himself links dew with the mountains in his evocative lament for Saul and Jonathan (2Sam.1:21), also later in his beautiful *Song of Ascents* (Ps.133:3). Each warrior willingly offering himself to the King is young, strong, glistening like the dew, and like it a precious gift of God. And the figure of dew points to an innumerable host, the honour of the King:

In the multitude of people is the king's honour
but in the want of people is the destruction of the prince

Prov.14:28

Alter comments that this "sounds very odd in the Hebrew", but that there is textual evidence for harerey qodesh: "holy mountains" (not odd-sounding!); he adds that "the similar-looking letters dalet and resh are often switched in scribal transcription". The Masoretic text reads holy majesties (hadrey qodesh, rendered the beauties of holiness by KJV, but the Palm of Deborah, where she "held court", was in the "mountains of Ephraim" (Jud.4:5), so it makes sense to follow Alter's emendation here.

Kirkpatrick (*The Psalms*, 1903), unusually, gives this line a better literal rendering than Alter's, as: in the day of thy muster. He also, helpfully, reproduces "the" Targum for this psalm. The Targum was originally the verbal paraphrase of the text in Aramaic, the language of the listener, necessitated because the Jews adopted Aramaic in Babylon and only the educated could then understand Hebrew, see Neh.8:8 etc. The Targum(s) was (were) not written down until very much later, but are a useful indication of the way Jesus and his contemporaries would have understood the text. This Targum text as it stands must date from the later second century at the earliest: I suspect that its reference to the law and the "world to come" represents a later understanding.

Note that in this text *Jehovah* renders the Hebrew consonantant text YHWH with the vocalisation for *Adonai*, since for the Jews the Name of God should not be spoken.

"Jehovah said by his word that he would make me lord of all Israel. But he said to me again, Wait for Saul who is of the tribe of Benjamin, until he die, for one kingdom approacheth not another [i.e. there cannot be two kings together], and afterwards I will make thine enemies thy footstool. The rod of thy strength shall Jehovah send forth from Zion, and thou shalt rule in the midst of thine enemies. Thy people of the house of Israel who devote themselves willingly to the study of thy law, in the day of battle shalt thou be holpen with them; in splendours of holiness shall the mercies of God hasten to thee like the descent of the dew: thy generations shall dwell securely. Jehovah has sworn and will not repent, that thou shalt be appointed prince of the world to come for merit, because thou hast been an innocent king. The Shekinah of Jehovah at thy right hand hath stricken through kings in the day of his wrath. He is appointed judge over the peoples: he hath filled the earth with the bodies of the wicked who have been slain: he hath stricken through the heads of exceeding many kings over the earth. From the mouth of the prophet in the way shall he receive doctrine; therefore shall he exalt the head.”
The King will bring judgement: the poet in this psalm is concentrating on the punishment of the wicked. The King will smash kings (v.5): he mediates the judgement of God who is at his right hand (in this verse Lord, capitalised, renders 'adonai, the plural form). God will have victory over his enemies, heaping up the dead (v.6). Those who make idols shall be like them, dead, as much later psalmists also emphasised (Pss.115:8; 135:18; cp. Is.6:9; Jer.5:21).

I have found the final verse of the psalm the most puzzling of all: -

He shall drink of the brook in the way
Therefore shall he lift up the head.  

Ps.110:7

But it is not the rush of victory that lifts up the head, nor exultation over one's foes; no, not even the exaltation of one's people in the honour of triumph. Here the psalmist says it is the most basic blessing of all, water: so excruciating in its absence and yet such a delightful refreshment; drinking water, the characteristic gift of God. David knew this too well as the incident of his three mighty men shows: -

David longed for water and said, "Oh, that someone would get me a drink from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!" So the three mighty men broke through the Philistine lines, drew water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem, and carried it back to David. But he refused to drink it; instead, he poured it out before the LORD. "Far be it from me to do this, O LORD," he said. "Is it not the blood of men who went at the risk of their lives?" And he would not drink it. 2Sam.23:15ff

He poured it out on the ground as a freewill offering to the LORD, the giver of life: thereby honouring the valour of his mighty men far more than if he had drunk it. The life is in the blood (Gen.9:4; Lev.17:11ff; Deut.12:23): the blood of the innocent spilled on the ground cries out to the LORD for vengeance (Gen.4:10), but water showered on the ground by God brings happy increase ("like showers watering the earth", Ps.72:6) since "the word of God returns to him not void" (Is.55:11).

God's King comes, with victory over his enemies, and surrounded by his people. And the King's head is lifted up not by triumph, neither by worship, but by the pure word of God.

9.7  The day of the King

In an extraordinary book, Psalm 118 stands out as extraordinary. It was probably one of the last psalms composed: Kirkpatrick32 confidently assigns it to the "exceeding great gladness" (Neh.8:17) that accompanied the unprecedented celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles in the month following the completion of Jerusalem's walls on "the 25th day of the month Elul" in the 21st year of Artaxerxes (444BC: Neh.6:15). Indeed, the psalm remains an important part of the Jewish liturgy of Tabernacles.

The three great Pilgrimage Feasts, which the Jews were supposed to celebrate in Jerusalem, were: the Passover (unleavened bread), the Feast of Weeks (the reaping festival, that is, the barley harvest), and the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles, the harvest festival). In three separate passages the Scripture insists that the people come "three times a year" (Ex.23:14,17; 34:23; Deut.16:16f). The second festival is called "Weeks" because a week of weeks (50 days) is counted from Passover. This is associated with the giving of Torah on Mt. Sinai, and of course it is also associated with Boaz taking Ruth to wife, with the result of the birth of David's grandfather.

Tabernacles, on the other hand, commemorates the forty years of wandering in the wilderness when the people all lived in tents, and points to the forging of the nation in that time. There was (almost) no-one left who knew Egypt, and this newly forged people were

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32  A.F.Kirkpatrick, The Psalms (1903)
able to burst out of the desert and take the Promised Land; that is, God made good on his Promises! What is the harvest but an earnest, in his lovingkindness, of the ultimate provision of life by God? And this lovingkindness is actually for the whole world, which is why Zechariah cried: "And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up year by year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of Tabernacles" (Zech.14:16), and why the psalmist called on "all ye nations" to "Praise the Lord" (Ps.117; this psalm is also appointed as a Proper Psalm for Easter!)

The Day of Judgement will indeed be a "Day of Wrath" (Zeph.1:15; this is the "Dies Ira" of the Requiem Mass), but Zephaniah is prophesying repentance to Josiah's court, a prophecy that was heeded – Josiah effected a great reform. Zephaniah concludes his prophecy with words of great comfort and encouragement to the "remnant" (Zeph.3:12) who have heeded his words:

Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel!
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away your punishment, has turned back your enemy.
The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.
On that day they will say to Jerusalem:
"Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.
The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
In his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing." Zeph. 3:14-17

The Day of the Lord is a day of judgement for the wicked, but a day of relief and rescue for the people of God. "At that time", Zephaniah sings, "I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home" (Zeph.3:20). Tabernacles is the feast when the Jews looked forward to God bringing them home.

For the Christians Ps.118 is appointed as a Proper Psalm for Easter Day. Christ has rearranged our understanding of the pilgrimage feasts: the passover feast looked forward to Good Friday; the feast of weeks to Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit; and the feast of booths to the Day of the Lord, the start of which is now interpreted as Easter. Easter Sunday was the day after the Passover Feast, and the song the people sang – out of time – for Jesus entering Jerusalem, "this is the day the Lord has made" (Ps.118:24), came to pass – unlooked for – after the Feast. They spoke truly: this indeed was that Day when God effected his great salvation for all people, the Day that God brought his people home, the Day the work was finished (John 19:30) and God wiped away the tears from all faces and swallowed up death for ever (Is.25:8). It was because this great Day had already dawned that Stephen could look in joy to heaven and pray for forgiveness for his enemies doing him to death (Acts 7:60) – a death that for him had no sting (Hos.13:14; 1Cor.15:55) because, in a provisional sense, he had already come home. He could see the Gates of Righteousness that were indeed the Gates of Victory we discussed above (Ps.118:19; §5.7)!

"I am that I am" – the Name of God (Ex.3:14) – is a self-referencing statement which expresses the ineffability of Reality. Any real thing in itself cannot be completely compassed by any description whatever: every description must necessarily be only partial. This is a property of rationality itself; a consequence of Gödel's theorem. 33 "The Day of the Lord" is a Biblical phrase that refers to such a large Reality: it is used in this

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33 See the extended discussion of the Incompleteness Theorems in §3.6 n.42
form twenty two times by the Prophets and four times by Peter and Paul. The Day is for God a single "time" whereas for us it is both the final Judgement Day itself and also the anticipation of it. For us, time extends; for Him, time is not (Rev.10:6). For us, creatures in time, time continues until the Day; but time is not for Him, the Lord of time, who "is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1John 1:5), just as time is not for photons, the first and the simplest of His creatures. For photons, in being massless, experience no time; in mediating simultaneity, they mediate time itself. The Creator, creating photons in the beginning created time itself, and therefore sees all created time as one. For God, the Creator of Time, he who "was and is and is to come" (Rev.4:8), the Day is a single event, just as He is One; for us, created in time, the Day extends from Easter forward to the final triumphant Day of Tabernacles, when the prophecies of Zechariah, of Zephaniah and of the other prophets will be fulfilled.

The Psalmist, in singing "this is the Day the LORD has made", looks forward to this final Day of the judgement of God, when all nations will praise the LORD, being overwhelmed with his kindness (Ps.117:2), as the psalmist boldly asserts and the later Zechariah forsees (Lk.1:78); nevertheless, the psalmist of Ps.118 still knows that Ezra's temple is not Ezekiel's Temple: the Glory has not yet returned!

If it is correct to place this Psalm in BC444, when the feast of Tabernacles was celebrated with great rejoicing by Nehemiah on the completion of the walls of the City, then, contrary to what the commentators all say, the "Gate" of v.20 through which the righteous enter is the gate of the City, not the gate of the Temple. Righteousness is characteristic of the King, and this clearly looks back to Ps.24:7,9 – "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, that the King of glory may come in!" – David was singing in Ps.24 of God entering Jerusalem, the City of David (2Sam.6:1ff), when the Ark was brought back from Obed-Edom the Gittite's house with rejoicing ... with shouts and the sound of the trumpets ... [with] leaping and dancing before the LORD" (2Sam.6:12ff). But there was no Temple then: the Ark had only a tent. This is underlined when Isaiah refers to the gates [through which] the righteous may enter (Is.26:2); again, these are the gates of the city, the strong city, whose walls and ramparts are the salvation of God (Is.26:1). Actually, the "gates" of neither Solomon's nor Ezra's temple are ever specifically mentioned, although temple "gatekeepers" are (1Chron.9:19ff; 26:1-19; Ps.84:10; and note that 1Chron.26:14f names the four Temple gates: East, North, South, West). And the gatekeepers long predated the Temple (Lev.8:35; Obed-Edom himself was a "gatekeeper", 1Chron.15:24).

That Ps.118:20 refers to a city gate is underlined by the timing: Ezra's Temple was completed in BC515 (Ezra 6:15); Nehemiah's walls in BC444. The keystone referred to in Ps.118:22 must have been for a city gate, not the gate of the temple completed two generations previously: where the temple gate is never mentioned, great care was always taken in the construction of city gates as is emphasised (among many other texts) by Joshua's curse on Jericho: "[Jericho's rebuilder] shall lay the foundation thereof in his firstborn, and in his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it" (Jos.6:26); the sequel (1Kings 16:34) clearly implies child sacrifice. The extended account of the rebuilding of

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34 Is.2:12; 13:6,9; 34:8; Jer.46:10; Lam.2:22; Ez.13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:11; 3:14; Amos 5:18,20; Ob.1:15; Zeph.1:7f,14,18; 2:2f; 14:1; 1Cor.5:5; 2Cor.1:14; 1Thess.5:2; 2Pet.3:4

35 This is a property of relativity: the Lorentz contraction of time as particles approach the speed of light means that light particles themselves (photons) – which travel at the speed of light! – have an infinite time contraction, that is, they do not "experience" any time. Of course, we cannot read too much into this since photons are elementary particles that do not experience anything at all, being elementary! Einstein's Theory of Relativity is exceptionally well established, and hinges on a coherent definition of "simultaneity", with times distinguishable only by the speed of travel of information – which is the speed of light!
the walls (Neh.3) names nine city gates, and the ceremony of the dedication of the wall carefully described in Neh.12:27ff names seven city gates. The doors of the Temple were there only to mark the boundary between the holy and the other; the gates of the city were powerful structures designed for defence.

The Christians knew that the Glory would never return to the Second Temple, the one destroyed by the Romans: the Third Temple, the one seen by Ezekiel in his vision, was not one made with hands, as Stephen asserted and Paul explained to the Athenians; as the writer to the Hebrews expounded at length and as Jesus himself said. But the Psalmist is not thinking of the Glory of God, or the Presence of God in the Temple (the Shekinah), he is thinking of the security of God's righteous ones, dwellers in the heavenly City and luxuriating in the blessings of God: "shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous" (Ps.118:15), and in jubilation the righteous leave their tents and enter the City.

Just so, Jesus entered the City of David on Palm Sunday to cries of Hosanna, and blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD (Ps.118:25f; Matt.21:9; Mk 11:9; Lk.19:38; John 12:13; it is remarkable that this episode is one of the very few recorded by all four Evangelists, underlining its importance); that Jesus was also thinking of this psalm is shown by the fact that he went straight to the Temple ("from the house of the LORD we bless you", Ps.118:26; cp. Matt.21:12f; Mk.11:11,15ff; Lk.19:45ff), and that he refers to this verse again later, after his prophecy of the seven Woes (Matt.23:39; Luke places this episode previously, but in a similar context, Lk.13:35).

At this point we should also underline the references to David in the Psalm, and both Matthew and Mark remind us that this "Hosanna" was heard five centuries later as invoking the memory of "the Son of David" (Matt.21:9,15; Mk.11:10). The opening and closing verses, "Give thanks to the LORD for he is good, his mercy endureth forever" were first sung by David when he brought the Ark to Jerusalem (1Chron.16:34), and the psalmist of Ps.106, the psalm terminating Book IV, brackets his psalm between this and the following verse from David's great psalm of praise. And both Ps.107 (opening Book V) and the antiphonal Ps.136 start with this refrain, "O give thanks to the LORD for he is good, his mercy endureth forever". Jeremiah quotes it in his heartstopping prophecy of the restoration of Jerusalem (Jer.33:11; cf. chs.30-33), and it is also sung with joy in the celebration of the completion of the Second Temple (Ezra 3:11). David never forgot that God is the King from whom kingship derives (1Sam.8:7), and at the crucial moment, when the Ark of the Covenant first entered the City of David, he gave thanks to the LORD, the King, whose mercy endureth forever. Jeremiah and the psalmists had exactly the same understanding.

The New Testament also repeatedly quotes Ps.118:22, The stone the builders rejected has become the keystone / The LORD has done this and it is marvellous in our eyes. I think

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36 Acts 7:48; 17:24; Heb.9:11,24; Mark 14:58
37 1Chron.16:34 = Ps.106:1; 1Chron.16:35f = Ps.106:47f. I interpret Book IV as being a collection of psalms derivative of (and expanding on) David's original psalm of praise. Many of the psalms in Book IV directly quote sections, sometimes large sections, of David's psalm.
38 Interestingly, the phrase used by the Evangelists for "head of the corner" is κεφαλή γωνίας (kephalen gonias), and they quote the LXX verbatim. It should be emphasised that "head" here implies no hierarchical connotation – for such connotations other Greek words (like archon) are used. "Head" is used here in the sense of source (as in headwaters of a river) rather than chief (as in headmaster). So in this case: the head stone, the lintel over the gate, is the stone that ties the building together; it does not rule the building! The Psalmist does not think that the stone rules the gate, he thinks that the stone enabled the gate to be finished so that he could enter the gates of righteousness (v.19f). The head stone is not the chief stone but the keystone, the source of the integrity of the gate, which is critical to the safety of the city.
that this psalm invites us to take the primary reference of this verse as a literal, not a metaphorical, statement. It seems that in the ruins of Jerusalem left by the Babylonians 142 years previously Nehemiah's builders searched for masonry suitable for the gates. Walls could be built with anything, but the strategic gates had very special requirements. The gateposts had to be monolithic, and so did the lintel which had to be both large enough to span the opening and strong enough to secure it. It had to be free from faults which could weaken it, and bring the whole edifice crashing down in the stress of siege. We can imagine the builders searching through the rubble for suitable stones and initially rejecting one, only to find on further inspection that it was much better than had first been apparent. We can imagine the builder dreaming of the rejected stone, that in fact it was good; going back the next day to have another look at it. And we can imagine his delight when he finds that his dream has led him to success. Perhaps this was the final gate that made the city secure, and the Jews could relax and no longer have to "build with one hand and hold their spears with the other" (Neh.4:17).

God is the King, the great builder: David sings: "Jerusalem is built like a city closely compacted together" (Ps.122:1). Did David build Jerusalem? No, and he gives glory to God. Justice and judgement derive from God himself: they are characteristic of the King; it is ultimately God himself who "builds and plants" the houses of Judah and Israel (Jer.31:28), it is God who will "bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and rebuild them as they were before" (Jer.33:7), and notice well here that in Jeremiah's time Israel had been destroyed centuries previously, with the ten tribes lost and completely assimilated. But in his time, the God who delights in impossibilities will also rebuild Israel. If the nations are redeemed and Israel is lost among the nations, then Israel will be also redeemed! Jeremiah is looking forward, as did the psalmists and the other prophets, to the new creation, the redemption of the whole world!

39 Matt.21:42; Mk.12:10; Lk.20:17; Acts 4:11; 1Pet.2:7. This is not in the same contexts as the "stumbling stone" or "cornerstone" quotes of, respectively, Is.8:14; Rom.9:32f; 1Pet.2:8 and Is.28:16; Eph.2:20; 1Pet.2:6, although Peter clearly links all of them.
9.8 The judgement of the King

Psalm 2 is another psalm appointed for Easter Day in the Christian liturgy, since it proclaims that the **son of God**, who is the **LORD's Christ**, has been appointed as King of the nations. The psalmist proclaims God's decree, "This day have I begotten thee", where the "**I**" is the emphatic pronoun underlining that the psalmist intends **son of God** as a reality, not a metaphor; John echoes this in speaking of "Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth". (Ps.2:7; Rev.1:5). In fact, as Kirkpatrick says, this psalm's "language is repeatedly borrowed in the Revelation, the great epic of the conflict and triumph of Christ's kingdom".

Psalm 2 has in view the **enthroned in heaven** (Ps.2:4) over the whole earth: the **LORD** is not merely a local Israelite god but the Maker of heaven and earth to whom *every knee shall bow* (Is.43:23; Rom.14:11; cp. 1Kings 19:18; Rom.11:4). All are subject to the justice of the King, including all those who think they are independently powerful. God will go to any length, up to and including *putting down the mighty from their seats* (Lk.1:52; cp. 1Sam.2:4), to bring justice to the earth and relief to his people.

The **LORD** is not like the kings of the earth, who in their greed and arrogance, stupidity and ignorance have brought to the world non-stop wars and misery, oppression and slaughter, famine, plague and hatred: the **LORD judges with justice**, and looks to earthly rulers (usually in vain) primarily for the establishment of justice. This is perhaps put most emphatically by Isaiah in a powerful punning couplet at the conclusion of the Song of the Vineyard:

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He looked for judgement (mispâh), and behold! oppression! (mispa\c'h)
For righteousness (ts'dâqâh), but behold! a cry! (ts'\a\c'qâh)
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Is 5:7

The Biblical importance of the ideas of **justice** and **judgement** cannot be over-emphasised; they pervade Scripture, invariably at crucial points. The first three

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40 For son of God see Ps.2:7; Ex.4:22; Deut.32:22; 2Sam.7:14; 1Chron.17:13; Matt.3:17; Acts 13:33; Heb.1:5 as the most important texts (there are many others). For the **LORD's Christ** (where **Christ** is merely the Greek for the Hebrew messiah, meaning "anointed") see Ps.2:2; Lk.2:26.

41 A.F.Kirkpatrick, *The Psalms* (1903). He lists them as follows: **God's King" rules the nations with a rod of iron"** (Ps.2:9; Rev.12:4; 19:15) and so do the King's servants (Rev.2:26f). "**Kings of the earth**" (Ps.2:2) occurs nine times (Rev.1:5; 6:15; 16:14; 17:2; 18:3,9, 19:19; 21:24). "**He that sitteth in the heavens"** (Ps.2:4) is central in Revelation: (Rev.4:2; 5:1,7; 19:4; 20:11; 21:5).

42 For the **LORD** judging justly see Gen.18:25; Pss.9:8; 35:24; Ps.51:4 (cited by Paul at Rom.3:4); Pss.67:4; 72:2; 96:10; 98:9; Is.11:4; Jer.11:20; Ez.33:20; Acts 17:31; 1Pet.2:23; Rev.19:11. For the requirement (usually in vain) on earthly rulers for the establishment of justice see Lev.19:5,15; Deut.1:16; 16:18; Pss.58:1; 72:2. Notice that this urgent expectation for justice pervades both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures, also being strong specifically in the Psalms.

43 The **vineyard** is a very important image of the Covenant. For the image of the vineyard, see: Ps.80; 107:37; Song 8:11,12; Is.27: 65:21; Jer.12:10; 32:15; Ez.28:26; Hos.2:15; Amos 9:14; Matt.20:1-16; 21:33-46; Mk.12:1-12; Lk.20:9-19

44 Justice (ts\d\a\c'qâh) is explained by Strong's Concordance (number 6663) as: a primary root; to be (causative make) right (in a moral or forensic sense). The related tsaddiq (6662) is: the right (natural, moral or legal), also (abstractly) equity or (figuratively) prosperity; and ts'dâqâh (6664) is: righteousness (abstractly), rectitude (subjectively), justice (objectively), virtue (abstractly), prosperity (figuratively).

45 Judgement (mispâh) is given by Strong (4941) as: properly a verdict (favorable or unfavorable) pronounced judicially, especially a sentence or formal decree (human or divine law, individual or collective), including the act, the place, the suit, the crime and the penalty: abstract justice, including a participant's right or privilege (statutory or customary), or even a style.
occurrences of justice refer to the righteousness of Noah (Gen.6:9; 7:1) and Abraham (Gen.15:6). The first occurrence of "judgement" comes together with "justice", following the important Covenant episode where God promises a son to Abraham and Sarah: 

For I know him, that he will command his household and his children after him and they shall keep the way of the LORD to do justice and judgement.  

Gen.18:19

The second occurrence of the judgement & justice pair is at a very emphatic position in the Mosaic Covenant right in the centre of the Holiness code:46 In righteousness [tsedeq] shalt thou judge [shâphat] thy neighbour. (Lev.19:15). We should draw the reader's attention here to the peculiarity of translation that although in English justice and righteousness (with respectively Latin and German roots) have rather different connotations, they are treated Biblically as synonyms: either can be used in different contexts for the same Hebrew word.

What about the Covenant with David? God's Promise to David, central in Psalm 2, is that "I will be his father and he shall be my son" (2Sam.1:14; 1Chron.17:13; Ps.2:7). David's part in this Covenant immediately follows the account of bringing the Ark to Jerusalem and God's promise to him: 

And the LORD preserved David whithersoever he went; and David reigned over all Israel; and David executed judgement and justice unto all his people 2Sam.8:14f; 1Chron.18:13f

It is noticeable that the Covenant statements in Samuel and Kings are paralleled by the Chronicler, who deliberately repeats these crucial passages. The first function of the King, and God's prime purpose for him, is specifically to do judgement and justice: these are seen as intrinsic to the Covenant. This is prominent also in the account of Solomon, who prays at the dedication of the Temple: 

If any man trespass against his neighbour, and an oath be laid upon him to cause him to swear, and the oath come before thine order in this house:  
then hear thou in heaven, and do, and judge (shâphat) thy servants, condemning the wicked, to bring his way upon his head; and justifying (tsâdaq) the righteous (tsaddîq), to give him according to his righteousness (tsêdâqâh).  
1Kings 8:32; 2Chron.6:23; cp.Deut.25:1

David's son Solomon, the object of the Davidic Covenant, has been raised specifically for this purpose. The Queen of Sheba witnesses to Solomon: 

The LORD loved Israel for ever, therefore made he thee king to do judgement and justice.  
1Kings 10:9; 2Chron.9:8

And in Solomon's psalm concluding Book II ("this concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse", Ps.72:20) judgement and justice are prominent, being repeated right at the start of the psalm: 

Give the King thy judgements [mishpâṭ] O God [Elohim]  
And thy righteousness [ts'êdâqâh] unto the King's son  
He shall judge [dîyn] thy people with righteousness [tsedeq]  
And thy poor with judgement [mishpâṭ]  
Ps.72:1f

This use of parallelism is remarkable: each of the two verses has two parallel lines, and the two verses parallel each other too. This device, of strict parallelism between as well as within verses, is used rather rarely and indicates the poet's desire to drive his point home; that judgement and justice is the characteristic of God's King, just as it is of God himself.

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46 (Lev.19:1,37. "Ye shall be holy, for I the LORD thy God am holy. I am the LORD"). Lev.19 is the centre of the Law ("love thy neighbour as thyself" v.18).

47 Mishpâṭ (see above note 43) derives from the primary root shâphat: to judge (Strong 8199), i.e.pronounce sentence (for or against); by implication, to vindicate or punish; by extension to govern; passive to litigate (literally or figuratively)
And notice that the concern of the poet is that the poor will obtain justice: proclaiming judgement is not the preserve of hell-fire preachers, on the contrary: the righteous king bringing just judgement to his needy and afflicted people (Ps.72:4) is fruitful, as

… rain upon the mown field
as showers that water the earth

Ps.72:6

It is telling that Solomon, dedicating the Temple, speaks of God (and, by extension, the King) justifying the righteous. This is a rather strange use of the English word and does not correspond to what we usually think of as "justification". The connotations of the Hebrew are different. It is true that Solomon had a court of law in mind, but such courts were not thought of in the narrowly legal ways we have become used to. How did he judge between the mothers of the dead and living babies? The woman appealed to the King about the other woman:

And she arose at midnight, and took my son from beside me, while thine handmaid slept, and laid it in her bosom, and laid her dead child in my bosom.

2Kings 3:20

What article of the penal code did Solomon use to judge between the two women? None, but he played a very serious game with them by threatening death to the surviving child!

And all Israel heard of the judgement [mishpât] which the King had judged [shâphat], and they feared the King: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgement [mishpât]

1Kings 3:28

It was by insight, not by law, that Solomon justified the innocent (righteous) mother. Judgement and justice are a sign of God's Covenant, and they are characteristic of God's King. They are the godly man's characteristic response to God. They are mentioned at emphatic places in the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants, and in the Davidic Covenant they are central, being in both accounts of the Covenant itself, in no less than seven Psalms closely associated with the establishment of Temple worship (and dozens of others), and also in the commission of Solomon together with his Covenant Psalm (Ps.72) as we have seen.

There are dozens of other references to judgement and justice in Isaiah invariably at climactic places; also in the other prophets. Such a reference is central to the central chapter of Job, and examples are found throughout the psalter and notably in Psalm 119 and in the Lament Psalm 89. These references taken together explicitly develop the Covenant theme, applying it emphatically to the coming Redeemer King.

The Scriptures warn the Church that woe betides those who fail to do judgement and justice.

Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness [lô' tsedeq]
his upper rooms by injustice [lô' mishpât]

Jer.22:13

and it is invariably economic and social relations that are being referred to, not the moral concerns that seem to predominate in the Church today: the King's business is politics! In the New Testament, Jesus, Paul, John, James and Peter all emphasise and look forward to judgement and justice as the culmination of the salvation of God, and it is clear that they are only repeating the Law and the Prophets: what has changed for them is that Jeremiah's prophecy, that the LORD "will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgement and justice in the earth" (Jer.23:5) has actually come to pass! God does not change, and judgement and justice is part of the bedrock of Christian understanding.

So now, listening to Psalm 2, we can hear the righteous King, executing judgement and justice in the earth. Kirkpatrick persuasively thinks that this psalm was probably composed for Solomon, perhaps to mark a victory in the long-running contention with Hadad or Rezon (1Kings 11:14ff, 23f), on the grounds that "the king's consciousness of his high calling, and the confidence with which he appeals to the divine promise, point to a time when that promise was still recent, and the lofty ideal of the theocratic kingdom had not been defaced by failure and defeat".49 This must remain conjectural, since Scripture only hints obliquely at such supposed events, and the historical record from the tenth century is very sparse.

Does it matter, that we cannot locate this psalm securely in time, considering its subsequent theological importance? In one sense of course, no, since its importance transcends its occasion. But in another sense, I think that it is very important to consider these eloquent texts as locatable in time in principle. After all, we

have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty

The particular occasion for this psalm may no longer be important, and certainly is no longer accessible, but it is very important that the psalm remains as a record of and witness to a particular occasion.

In any case, Ps.2 sounds to me like a very ancient text which presents some significant difficulties to modern ears. It was this sort of Old Testament text that William Blake hated, with harsh judgement displacing love. Readers of Blake have taken his Urizen as representing the God of Moses, the Ancient of Days; the Urizen who says: "One curse, one weight, one measure, / One King, one God, one Law".50 Kathleen Raine says: "Urizen's book of iron 'plac'd above On clouds of death' is the Mosaic law: and the bread prepared by [Urizen's] daughters is the 'bread of heaven' sent by 'that very cruel being' who gave the law to Moses", and she explains that this 'bread of heaven' is actually the bread of tears.51 The genius of Blake is as a fascinating yet often impenetrable visionary; but however one interprets him there remains a perception today that the New Testament God (represented by Jesus) is a god of love, and very different from the Old Testament god of wrath. I wish to contradict this perception in the strongest possible terms.

First of all, the traditional English text of the end of Ps.2 is a poor rendering. The Hebrew text is difficult and disputable; it is easy to fall into various misconceptions of it. However, the JPS52 text is better than both KJV and NIV :-

49 A.F.Kirkpartrick, Psalms (1903)
50 William Blake, Book of Urizen (1794) 4
51 Kathleen Raine, Blake and Tradition (1968) vol.II:96
52 Jewish Publication Society, Hebrew-English Tanakh (2003). They mark both "tremble with fright" and "Pay homage in good faith" as "uncertain" renderings of the Hebrew, and note an MS alternative of
So now, O kings, be prudent
accept discipline, you rulers of the earth
Serve the Lord in awe
tremble with fright
Pay homage in good faith
lest he be angered and your way be doomed
in the mere flash of his anger
Happy are all who take refuge in him

Ps.2:10-12 (JPS)

KJV gives "kiss the Son lest he be angry" for v.12a, but this is a misreading. NIV gives "his wrath can flare up in a moment" for v.12c, but it is interesting that JPS gives "... and your way be doomed in the mere flash of his anger" for v.12b&c. The power of God is such that only a brief flash of his anger would be enough to destroy you (and note that "his anger" is God's anger, not the King's). This reading makes immediate sense in the context of the poem, and much more sense than the suggestion that either God or God's King are dangerously touchy. After all, we know that God is "slow to anger and abounding in mercy", and there seems no reason why the poet of Ps.2 should not know this too.

Is Jesus' "God of love" different from the Old Testament God of wrath? I have been at pains throughout this book to demonstrate continuity between the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures, to show how the New Testament writers based their whole thought squarely on the foundation of the Old Testament. There may be a number of Covenants progressing from the Covenant with Creation itself through the Covenants with Eve, with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, and with David and the prophets, right up to Jesus himself, but these are built upon, not contradicted or abrogated, as we saw above in the discussion about Jeremiah's prophecy of the restoration of Israel (Jer.31 et passim). The understanding by the people of God of the purposes of God do develop over time, but if we see further than they, it is not because we are wiser or more spiritual! On the contrary, we see further because we stand on the shoulders of giants, as Bernard of Chartres said in the twelfth century and Newton famously said subsequently. As Peter explained to us:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

1Pet.1:10ff

Central in Psalm 2 is the reiteration of the Promise to David, and this Promise is emphasised right up to and including the time of Jesus. And part of the Promise is that the King will bring judgement, a judgement involving reverses for the wicked and destruction of their plans. Jesus himself spoke of divisions, of the sword, and of the coming wrath of God (Matt.3:7; 10:34; Lk.3:7; 12:49f; 21:24; 23:28f; John 3:36), and indeed the Temple was destroyed in AD70, never to be rebuilt. The destruction of Jerusalem at the same time was foreseen in great detail by John (Rev.18 et passim). The judgement pictured in Psalm 2 really is part of the Gospel of Christ. The Day of Wrath is coming: but blessed are all who take refuge in him!

"rejoice with trembling" for the former. "KJV" = "King James Version" (1611). "NIV" = "New International Version" (1984)

53 Both Kirkpatrick and Robert Alter also point this out. Alter elaborates that the Masoretic text "bar" is Aramaic for "son" – the Hebrew word would be "ben". Alter renders the text as "worship purely", an equivalent but better reading than JPS, a reading which Kirkpatrick notes was also given by Jerome in the fourth century.

54 Ex.34:6; Num.14:18; Pss.86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Jon.4:2; Nah.1:3; Neh.9:17
9.9 The bride of the King

I am my lover's
and his desire is for me
Come, my lover, let us go into the countryside
let us spend the night in the henna bushes
Let us go early to the vineyards
To see if the vines have budded
If their blossoms have opened
if the pomegranates are in bloom
The mandrakes send out their fragrance
and at our door is every delicacy
Both new and old
that I have stored up for you, my lover

We have cited these verses previously, and the reader would not be mistaken in considering them frankly erotic: the opening acknowledgment of "desire", the images of budding and blooming, and the mandrake as a known aphrodisiac (Gen.30:14ff) all attest this reading. We noted before that this whole book is included in the canon of Scripture precisely because the Lord's ... compassions do not fail, as Jeremiah was able to whisper to his soul in the very centre of his Lamentations (Lam.3:22f); it is because they are new every morning that he was able at length to see the greatness of the faithfulness of God. This is the God who is passionate about us, amazing as that might appear to be. And even if you are not a believer you can still see that this collection of texts known as the Bible certainly asserts that God is passionate about us.

The Scriptures are shot through with the idea of marriage. The foundational text is right at the start, in Genesis chapter 1, and I quote from the 1611 King James not because I like the antiquarian style but because it is a deliberately literal translation (for example maintaining the distinction between the singular and plural second person pronoun), and I want to emphasise what the text actually says:

And God [Elohim: plural] said, let us make [plural] man [adam: singular] in our image [singular] after our likeness [singular]: and let them [sic] have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them.

Gen.1:26f

This is a very ancient text: it is one of the very few places in the Bible where plural pronouns are used for God, and where plural verbs are used for his actions. God is One, but he is not alone! Nor does he want to be alone: he says, "It is not good that man should be alone" (Gen.2:18) and he made man-and-woman together in "the image of God"! We shall see that the texts are plain: God wants a relationship with us; not the reserved English sort of relationship, all stiff upper lip and starched collars, but a passionate and intimate relationship for which the only fully adequate language is that of marriage.55

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55 This is not really the place to comment on the current (June 2013) implementation around the world of "same sex marriage", but it is worth noting that the Biblical attitude to homosexuality is, very largely, to ignore it, despite its ubiquity in the ancient world. There is the prohibition in the Law (Lev.18:21) but no record of such a case; then the references to "male shrine prostitutes" (Deut.23:17; 1Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2Kings 23:7; Job 36:14). Eight isolated references, that is all. The episode in Sodom (Gen.19) should be compared to the entirely equivalent episode at the end of Judges (Jud.19ff), and then compared again with Ezekiel's comment on Sodom, that their primary sin was that "they did not help the poor and needy" (Ez.16:49), and Jesus' comment that Sodom was less culpable than Capernaum (Matt.11:23; cp.Matt.10:15; Lk.10:12). By comparison, there are entire books railing...
The most ancient texts do not go this far, they restrict themselves to calling God "Father", language which for all its pedigree was still revolutionary in Jesus' time. We have seen and emphasised already the Promise of God to David: I will be his father, and he shall be my son (1Sam.7:14; 1Chron.17:13); note well that this is not a metaphor, God says that he will be a father to David's line, he does not say that he will be like a father! But this is not the first such assertion: hundreds of years earlier, Moses sang: Is not He thy father that hath bought thee? … and continued :-

But Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked ...
Then he forsook God [Eloah] which made him
And lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation ...
Of the Rock that begat thee [Jeshurun] thou art unmindful,
And hast forgotten God [El] that formed thee.
And when the LORD saw it he abhorred them
Because of the provoking of his sons and of his daughters Deut.32:6,15ff

Here, "Jeshurun" ("the upright one") is Israel, and "Eloah" (a singular form of "Elohim", the usual word for "God") is the exact equivalent of the Arabic "Allah". Note again that Moses says that God is our Father – not a metaphor! – and in fact he goes much further by saying not only that God begat Israel but that he "formed" him, that is, he "brought him forth", using a word with a connotation of birthing. And then he underlines it all by referring to him, that is Israel ("Jeshurun"), as them; the One encompassing the many. And them here refers to his sons and daughters, where he specifically mentions the daughters too! It is surprising how consistently the Biblical texts maintain the equality of man and woman – this is the basic Creational Covenant, that man-and-woman together are the image of God. God is not masculine, neither is he feminine, but both masculine and feminine attributes are a part of the image of God, as we have seen and as the later prophets sometimes asserted; for example, note that Isaiah later prophesies that God will be like a mother :-

Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool …
As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you Is.66:1,13

Isaiah also emphatically calls God "Father" :-

He said, "Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me";
and so he became their Saviour …
But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us;
you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name …
Oh, that you had rent the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you! …
But now, O LORD, you are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. …
Behold! Look! We pray! For we are all your people. Is.63:8,16; 64:1,8,9

against ordinary prostitution (as a figure of idolatry). In the New Testament there is the harsh statement by Paul in Romans (Rom.1:24), and perhaps a couple or so of more oblique references. But compare the comment of Josephus on the thugs roaming Jerusalem, entirely equivalent to the thugs referred to in Judges 19: Greek practice honoured homosexuality and we know it was widespread both in the long-Hellenised Palestine of Jesus' day and in the Roman empire so extensively travelled by Paul, but still there are barely a handful of references in the Greek Scriptures.

We should note that Jesus' use of Abba (Mk.14:36) is not entirely equivalent to Daddy. N.T.Wright discusses this in detail (citing a large literature) in Jesus and the Victory of God (1996) ch.13 ("The Return of the King") §4. Abba was not only used by children – there are a number of counter-examples. Nevertheless, it is clear that Jesus' usage is remarkably different from common first century usage.
Jeremiah also calls God "Father" :-

I myself said, 'How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.'
I thought you would call me 'Father'
and not turn away from following me.
But like a woman unfaithful to her husband,
so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel, declares the LORD.  

Jer.3:19,20

later insisting, *I am Israel's Father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son* (Jer.31:9)! Not only was the idea of God as Father well known by the time of the Exile, it is clear from both Jeremiah and Malachi that by that time it was a commonplace: *"Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us?"* (Mal.2:10).

You have defiled the land with your prostitution and wickedness …
Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute: you refuse to blush with shame
Have you not just called to me:
"My Father, my friend from my youth, will you always be angry, will your wrath continue for ever?"
This is how you talk, but you do all the evil you can!  

Jer.3:3ff

It is Jesus who turns this commonplace around and teaches his disciples to pray to God personally, as a radically new departure, in the *Our Father* (Matt.6:9; Lk.11:2). But the texts go much further than this: listen to Isaiah :-

Sing O barren woman, you who never bore a child
Burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labour
Because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has an husband

For your Maker is your Husband – the LORD Almighty is his name ...

The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit

a wife who married young only to be rejected, says your God.
For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back  

Is.54:1,5ff

Not content with God calling himself Father, he now also calls himself Husband!  Is there any limit to his extravagant language?  Is he serious?  Are we misreading the text?

Well, it turns out that he is, and we are not. This is not an isolated text and we will show the centrality of this theme in the Prophets. Isaiah also says :-

For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy rebuilder marry thee: and as the bridegroom
rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee  

Is.62:5

And the whole book of Hosea (contemporary with Isaiah) is built around his marriage to a shrine prostitute as an extended and very real allegory of the relationship of God with his people :-

When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD." So he married Gomer ...

Hos.1:2

and the subsequent language he uses is by turns very rough and extravagantly beautiful :-
I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals; 
she decked herself with her earrings and her jewels, 
and she went after her lovers, but me she forgot, declares the LORD.
Therefore, behold, I will allure her; 
And bring her into the desert and speak tenderly to her …
In that day, declares the LORD, thou shalt call me 'my husband'; 
and shalt call me no more 'my master' [Baal].
I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked. …
I will betroth thee unto me forever; 
I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion.
I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness, and thou shalt know the LORD. 

The imagery depends on God being supremely serious about the intimacy of his relationship with us, an intimacy that can only properly be described by marriage language – conversely, the proper language for our trespassing on this relationship is that of prostitution!

The later prophets systematically identified idolatry with adultery and prostitution, images that depend on the image of marriage for a right relationship with God. We have already cited a passage like this in Jeremiah, and this powerful image is there right at the start of his prophecy where God says :-

I remember thee, the devotion of thy youth, 
thy love as a bride
When thou wentest after me in the wilderness 
in a land not sown
Israel was holiness unto the LORD

and he goes on to say: I was an husband to them in the electric passage where he declares a new Covenant :-

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, 
and with the house of Judah;
Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers 
in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt;
Which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, 
saith the LORD.
But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel;
After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; 
and will be their God, and they shall be my people.
And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, 
saying, Know the LORD:
For they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, 
saith the LORD:
For I will forgive their iniquity, 
and I will remember their sin no more. 

For Ezekiel (prophesying the fall of Jerusalem) the mood gets grimmer: it is an allegory that ought to be beautiful, but becomes more and more terrifying as the original relationship becomes sour and ends in tragedy (chapters 16, 23, 24). Nevertheless, the opening of the passage describes our covenant relationship in graphic terms of marriage, honeymoon and joy :-
Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, "Live!"
and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, "Live!"

I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew up and developed and became the most beautiful of jewels. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew, you who were naked and bare.

Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine.

I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointments on you. I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. I adorned you with jewellery: I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck, and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head.

So you were adorned with gold and silver; your clothes were of fine linen and costly fabric and embroidered cloth. Your food was fine flour, honey and olive oil. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen.

And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendour I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign LORD. Ez.16:6-14

It is only in the context of these astonishing Scriptures that we can really appreciate what may be the most remarkable psalm of all, Psalm 45: -

Your throne O God will last for ever and ever
a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom
You love righteousness and hate wickedness
therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy..

Princesses are your cherished ones: the royal bride stands at your right in gold of Ophir
Listen, princess, consider and give ear: forget your people and your father's house
The king is enthralled by your beauty, honour him for he is your lord ...
All the princess's treasure is pearls: filigree of gold her raiment
In embroidered stuff she is led to the king: maids in train her companions Ps.45:7,10,14

At first glance one might think that the court poet composed this poem with all the courtly exaggerated language customary at royal weddings. But then, what would it be doing in Psalms? How can hyperbolic ephemera be elevated to sacred literature?

In fact, we have demonstrated that the language actually is not exaggerated: it is the sort of language that the prophets used in trying to communicate to the nation the quality of relationship that God wants with his people.

The scholars are edging towards accepting the traditional uncritical position that this psalm was for the marriage of Solomon to the princess of Tyre, which seems to me the only plausible occasion for such a poem. But in this case, why does the superscription not mention Solomon? One would think that the editors would have been keen to record such an august affiliation! I think that the answer to this lies in the record of the Chronicler of the ultimate failure of Solomon: he had many foreign wives who turned his heart after other gods contrary to the commands, and perhaps the editors of Psalms thought that association with Solomon might rather devalue the poetry.57

According to the superscription Ps.45 is explicitly a wedding song (literally a "song of loves"), to the tune of "Lilies". Notice that lilies betoken a pure godly love (as in the Song), and this same tune was also called for by David in a psalm which ends: They that

57 The references are to 1Kings 11:8,4; Num.25:6; Deut.17:17; Ezra 9:12. Note that Pss.72 and 127 relate to early Solomon – his coronation and the building of the Temple – where he was blameless.
love his name shall dwell [in Zion]. Notice that the fact that the love is "pure" and "godly" does not mean it cannot be sexual. Solomon (or the poet of the Song) is specifically speaking of the love between man and woman, and his poem has always been taken by both the Jews and the Christians as an image of the intensity of the relation between man and God ("man" here being gender-neutral, as usual), as well as being an expression of the image of God in the relation of man-and-woman together. Men and women are passionate creatures, and this is because God is emphatically not a dispassionate Creator! Both Jews and Christians understand that sex was God-given and is to be enjoyed in all its physicality. They also understand that sex is not only physical, and that it ultimately draws its meaning from an apprehension of the love of God. What do we know? The old language of a man knowing a woman (Gen.4:1), and vice versa (Lk.1:34) evokes the all the various qualities of knowledge that there are, that are today rather overlooked. Today we tend to promote head knowledge above hand knowledge, and often seem to deny the existence of heart knowledge altogether. But wisdom recognises the value of the knowledge of hand, of head and of heart; appreciating that we need all three: none should be promoted above the others (1Cor.12:25).

In the Christian church Ps.45 is appointed as a Proper Psalm for Christmas Day! The reason is both that the coming of Christ into the world is the result of God loving us with an everlasting love (Jer.31:3), and also that at this time we are looking for the Second Coming of Christ – as a Judge yes: but for us more as a Bridegroom coming for his Bride. The prophets said again and again, as we have seen, that God considers himself as our Husband, in reality, not in a manner of speaking; Jesus takes up this language in many places, emphatically calling himself the Bridegroom (Matt.9:15; Mk.2:19; Lk.5:34) and also telling pointed Wedding parables (Matt.22:1-14; Lk.12:35-40). John the Baptist had previously picked up these ideas from the prophets and calls Jesus Bridegroom (John 3:29).

I think that John alludes specifically to this Psalm when he :-

saw a new heaven and a new earth ... and ... the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband

Rev.21:2

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58 The references are to the Song (2:1f,16; 4:5; 5:13; 6:3; 7:2) and to Ps.69:36.
10 Conclusion: Weaving the Tapestry

How to draw together all the threads? Can I summarise the Book of Psalms? I hope that you will think, as I do, that this is a foolish idea! If someone was telling you about an art exhibition, or a play, or a concert, would you be content at the mere telling? Wouldn't you want to go and experience it for yourself? Events might conspire against you, but in any case you would know that the description could only ever be a pale shadow of the thing itself.

Nevertheless, all the disparate threads of this book are as it were in a jumble on the floor: I cannot be content to leave them there. So far, I have merely unpicked threads from the tapestry of God to display the variety of qualities each has. There is much labour for the weaver in turning all the spools of yarn into a tapestry; bringing us appreciation of the rich tapestry of the Book of Psalms can only be the proper work of the Holy Spirit of God. But I can at least wind up the yarns into their spools and leave them in some sort of order, however perfunctory.

In this book I have used quite a wide vocabulary, relishing words like solipsism, cognates, anomie, ontological, antiphonal, epistemology, quietism, synecdoche and others. I have not hesitated to elaborate mathematical ideas in the appropriate places, and I have invoked quite a wide literature in making various points. Why go to all this complication? It is because Psalms is not a children's storybook! The psalmists touch the whole gamut of human experience, but they use a language that is so apparently artlessly simple that modern man in the rich Western world can completely overlook their intent. In our self-absorbed sophistications we mistakenly suppose that because the Psalms are designed to be accessible to the simple, they are therefore for simpletons. On the contrary! They are for everyone, the clever just as much as the simple. My intention is to jolt any who may consider themselves clever into taking Psalms with a new seriousness. "Clever" and "simple" are not qualities that God regards; rather he asks: Who is wise? Who has a pure heart?

We can emphasise this. My book is obtuse, Psalms is direct; my book is rational, Psalms is passionate; my book won't win any prizes and is for the few that can tolerate an academic style, Psalms is of an exceptionally high literary quality and is for everyone: if my book is not forgotten in a few years I will be surprised, but Psalms will continue to be loved for the next thousand years! Nevertheless, the discourse of modern man – the way we speak today – seems to me to be too often frighteningly poor. George Orwell, with his "Newspeak" (1984, published in 1949) is widely regarded as prescient. I want to get people to open the Book of Psalms, perhaps for the first time, or perhaps for the thousandth time, and to be able to see for themselves more of the riches that are there.

I started with the wonders of God: the psalmists are convinced that God does unprecedented things that one would naturally think were impossible, and in doing these things he continually remakes our worldview. The psalmists expect to have their perceptions turned upside down by their relationship with God. It is in the context of this shimmering concreteness of the presence and purposes of God that we have to listen to every psalm. The perception of the impossibilities of God is itself a form of praise, and therefore this is an essential feature of the Book of Praises!

We are both schizophrenic and woefully ill-informed today in questions of impossibility, managing to be manifestly irrational, and apparently (but anachronistically) "rational" by turns, as well as completely failing to grasp what modern science says about such things. Many books continue to be published whose authors soberly urge us to be systematically reductionist in a sense worthy of the nineteenth century, apparently oblivious of the
twentieth century revolutions in mathematics and physics that fatally undermined such positions. At the same time our TV and cinema screens are filled with excruciatingly incoherent conceptions: vampires, werewolves, ghouls and other impossible monsters. Apparently, we want to be "rational", but can't!

Do we even know what being rational is? Do we know the limits of rationality? It is ignorance of these limits that also limits our understanding of what is possible! The psalmists understand very well that our ideas of what is possible (and therefore also what is impossible) are not determined primary by rationality but by our worldviews. And it is our worldview they intend to dramatically extend!

Into thine hand I commit my spirit: thou hast redeemed me, O LORD God of truth.

… thou hast set my feet in a spacious place

Ps.31:5,8

The God of truth will set our feet in a spacious place, if we let him. We should not be content with our parochial and comfortable vision of how the world is. Indeed, we cannot be content, considering how uncomfortable the world is! Well then, how is the world? The psalmists try again and again to open our eyes to those "impossibilities" (wonders) of God, specifically to broaden and deepen our understandings of the whole world.

We are, inescapably, creatures in time: we revel in telling tales to each other. What most moves any of us is story. What the world is, is one thing. What it was is quite another. What it could be, what it could become, is a thing of a different order altogether. And how we can participate in the story of changing the world from what it was to what it will be is something the psalmists are rooted in. We have looked in detail at how the psalms are shot through and through with the history of the children of God, and at how important it is to the psalmists that God did things in times past that when understood properly helps us to make sense of the present, and also (bearing in mind God's penchant for doing "impossible" things) enables us to look hopefully into the future:-

How abundant are the good things
that you have stored up for those who fear you …
Praise be to the LORD.
for he showed me the wonders of his love
Ps.31:19,21

History is central to both Christians and Jews. Both Christians and Jews made and treasured records of what happened. And the psalmists explicitly rehearse the story many times in different ways for different purposes. But implicitly, the story is always present since it underpins our grasp of the purposes of God. We have not studied psalm 23 in any detail, and it is not a history psalm, but when David says,

When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art near me
Ps.23:4

he has in mind the whole history of Israel, especially Moses leading the people through the Sea. We are not supposed to hear the psalms in a vacuum, independent of time. We are supposed to see them, coloured, shimmering, iridescent and sparkling, in the light of the past. And we are supposed to expect the Spirit of God to open our eyes to the glorious light that shines through them into the darkness of the future. The darkness is real enough. But the light is also real, and the psalmists want to assure us that "the light overcomes the darkness" (Pss.18:28; 139:11; Jn.1:5).

History records the past: Covenant promises the future. For the psalmists, Covenant is as central as is history – they are two sides of the same coin. The psalmists praise God because his promise is secure; Covenant permeates their poetry. I have teased out the thread of History partly because this is also the thread of Covenant. And where Covenant underpins the Confidence psalms, it is the very cornerstone of the Lament psalms. It is important to recognise these two threads through Psalms.
I emphasise again that "confidence psalms" or "lament psalms" (or any other classification of the psalms) do not exist! Psalms cannot be pigeon-holed into this or that "type". Each psalm is what it is, a poem to be sung or spoken; to be repeated, relished, weighed and meditated upon. But the listener should be alive to any number of issues that the poet may want to be recognised; indeed, may expect will be recognised! These are the "threads" I draw attention to in this book.

In the last chapter of the book I have switched emphasis somewhat, from how we ourselves currently feel – confident or apprehensive, beaten down or elated, joyful or terrified – to the character and actions of the God who is able to rule these feelings, and the character of his King. This leads us a whole new set of "threads" which put the Scriptures into an entirely new light. Again and again we return to our knowledge of the purposes of God, our laughably limited knowledge, which should perhaps be properly called ignorance! We know so little and imagine less, and the little we know is so full of error that we dream up all sorts of foolishness about God's intentions!

What are these "threads" that we should recognise as touching the King of the Cosmos? We have heard of the Pax Romana, but the Pax Christi, the peace of God's Anointed One, is of a different order! God intends the Majesty of his King to bring a real peace, a peace of the heart, not one based on power, oppression and greed. But this peace is not only personal but communal:

And rend your [plural] heart [singular], and not your garments [plural] Joel 2:31

God intends us to sit together, everyone under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid.1 And the blessing the King brings is, first and characteristically: Judgement! Societies do not exist without order, but what is this order built on? The Romans (and the British!) built their empire on slavery and taxes, but God's King builds his realm on Justice. The world's kings have power over their people, but God's King has power over chaos itself!

So then, God's King brings health – salvation – but can we respond? He is coming, but who is willing? The Day of the King is at hand to execute Judgement, but this brings us comfort, not terror! And to cap it all, the last word starkly contrasts with the way of the world: the King's heart yearns not for slaves, but for a Bride!

Like a tapestry, Psalms is a set of separate poems each woven through with the threads of the multiple purposes, concerns, loves and vision of God in multiple different ways. I have tried to show how hearing the psalms implies also hearing the story of what God has already done, and why; and also the stories about what God intends to do, and why. I have cited most of the books of the Bible many times: to read the psalms in isolation from the rest of Scripture is quite simply to misread them!

How shallow are we? Or do we listen to the psalmists and "delight in the law of the LORD", where of course it is the psalmists themselves who explain this law to us in terms of the heart! O, let us also be such men and women as that, whose :-

… delight is in the law of the LORD
and who meditate in his law day and night.
They shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water
that bringeth forth his fruit in season
his leaf also shall not wither Ps.1:2f

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1 The references are: for the vine and fig tree: 1Kings 4:25; Mic.4:45; Zech.3:10 (and note here that his is gender-neutral, the poet intends us to understand his or her); for none shall make them afraid: Lev.26:6; Job 11:19; Is.17:2; Jer.30:10; 46:27; Ez.34:28; Mic.4:4; Zeph.3:13

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11 Epilogue: How to read the Psalms

Individual Christians and the whole Church corporately have been reading (and singing) *Psalms* since Pentecost nearly two thousand years ago. And of course the Jews did the same, for at least a thousand years earlier. They have not needed lessons from the academics in how to do it! On the face of it the psalms are simple literature using very simple literary means, and they have been found accessible by nearly everyone that pays them attention. But the simplicity is itself a great art form, allowing *Psalms* to speak directly to our hearts.

Today, in our society of instant materialist gratification, there is some danger that we lose the continuity with the past; indeed, there is the danger that what went before is swamped with the fashions of today. In such an unthinking atmosphere, *Psalms* may not be considered fast enough, or cool enough. But everyman, faced with natural perplexity, in fact recognises the power of a heart’s cry to God.

In this book I have not gone through all the psalms explaining them verse by verse. There is a place for books like that, and I have recommended more than one. My purpose was to open the book out, so that readers would see how *Psalms* is locked into the whole sweep of Scripture. The psalmists interpret the past and point to the future, all in the course of opening their hearts to God. I have tried to show the bigger picture, to encourage Christians today to make much more systematic use of this treasure house of knowledge and wisdom, of faith and of hope, and of a deep and abiding trust in the unfailing love of our God.

How to read *Psalms*? Be systematic. And be persistent. Can a new language be learnt by occasional dabbling? We need to train our hearts and minds to see things God’s way. "Why art thou downcast, O my soul? Why so disquieted within me? Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise him, the health of my countenance and my God!" (Ps.42:11). We have studied this psalm in detail above, and seen that the text, rich in allusion, richly rewards closer attention, but King James’ translators understood the nub of this poem very well. "As the hart pants after the water brooks, so panteth my soul for thee O God!" (v.1).

People are fond of saying that there are "no words" for this or that experience. The psalmists proved them wrong three thousand years ago, and wrong they have remained ever since. As our Lord Jesus Christ is the Word, so the Christian has words for all experiences, however high, however low. Look in *Psalms*. 
The author: Chris Jeynes has been a research scientist at the University of Surrey Ion Beam Centre for over thirty years, liaising with national and international scientists wanting to run experiments on the Surrey ion accelerators. He has co-authored over 200 papers in the refereed scientific literature, and has contributed significantly to the analysis of thin materials using energetic ion beams. He has also been interested for a long time in the history of ideas.

He has been married for 37 years, with a daughter, a son, and a one-year-old grandchild.
We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help

Ps. 33:20

Embroidery by V. F. Jeynes: “Hope” (30 x 30 cm)