

# PRAYING THE JEWISH PSALMS AS CHRISTIANS<sup>1</sup>

## 1.0 Introduction

The Book of the Psalms is divided into five smaller books, the divisions being indicated by doxologies or short hymns of praise (Psalms 41:13; 72:19; 89:52; 106:48 and 150:6). The following is an outline of this division:

Book 1	Psalms 1-41
Book 2	Psalms 42-72
Book 3	Psalms 73-89
Book 4	Psalms 90-106
Book 5	Psalms 107-150

Note that the numbering system according to the Hebrew text is different from that according to the Greek text. The fivefold division of the Psalter was probably intended to mirror the five books of the Torah. Liturgical books (e.g. the Lectionary) generally follow the Greek text and exegetical books (e.g. commentaries) follow the Hebrew text. These notes will use the Hebrew numeration. It is useful however to compare the two numbering systems:

<b>HEBREW</b>	<b>GREEK</b>
Psalms 1 - 8	Psalms 1 - 8
Psalms 9 - 10	Psalms 9
Psalms 11 - 113	Psalms 10 - 112
Psalms 114 - 115	Psalms 113
Ps 116	Psalms 114 - 115
Psalms 117 - 146	Psalms 116 - 145
Ps 147	Psalms 146 - 147
Psalms 148 - 150	Psalms 148 - 150

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<sup>1</sup> These notes are based on some of my own work and on Walter Brueggemann, "Christians in 'Jewish Territory'," in *Praying the Psalms* (Cascade Books, Eugene OR: 2007), 43-62.

For most of the psalms, the Greek numeration is one behind that of the Hebrew

The Psalms form the centrepiece of Christian liturgy, piety, and spirituality. This is evident in the use made of the Psalms by the NT, most especially in the passion of Jesus. Yet our use of the Psalms has certain difficulties because they are totally Jewish in their mode of expression and in their faith claims. And even with our best intentions, the different distinctions of Jewish and Christian faith are not to be overlooked or easily adapted.

The Psalms were composed in a variety of settings about which we know extraordinarily little. During the period of the First Temple Period (1000 – 586 BC) the Jerusalem Temple was a generator of Psalms. In the Second Temple Period (516 BC – 70 AD) there were guilds or groups of “temple singers” who produced more Psalms. Outside of Jerusalem, the major sanctuaries of Gilgal, Bethel, and Shiloh also produced Psalms. It is for that reason that the Book of Psalms is a “collection of collections.”

## 2.0 Christian Ways of Avoiding “Difficulties”

There are two typical ways in which the Christian Church gets around the “difficulties” of their Jewishness:

- Selective choice of Psalms and specific verses.
- “Spiritualizing” the Psalms.

### 2.1 Selective Choice of Psalms and of Specific Verses

The first way is to be highly selective and make use of those Psalms that are most pleasant to us and that contain the least objectionable material. This involves completely avoiding some Psalms entirely, for example, **Psalms 109:6-19**, because it is too full of rancour and venom:

<sup>6</sup>They say, “Appoint a wicked man against him;  
let an accuser stand on his right.

<sup>7</sup>When he is tried, let him be found guilty;  
let his prayer be counted as sin.

<sup>8</sup>May his days be few;  
may another seize his position.

<sup>9</sup>May his children be orphans  
and his wife a widow.

<sup>10</sup>May his children wander about and beg;  
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.

- <sup>11</sup> May the creditor seize all that he has;  
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.
- <sup>12</sup> May there be no one to do him a kindness  
nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.
- <sup>13</sup> May his posterity be cut off;  
may his name be blotted out in the second generation.
- <sup>14</sup> May the iniquity of his father be remembered before the LORD,  
and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out.
- <sup>15</sup> Let them be before the LORD continually,  
and may his memory be cut off from the earth.
- <sup>16</sup> For he did not remember to show kindness  
but pursued the poor and needy  
and the brokenhearted to their death.
- <sup>17</sup> He loved to curse; let curses come on him.  
He did not like blessing; may it be far from him.
- <sup>18</sup> He clothed himself with cursing as his coat;  
may it soak into his body like water,  
like oil into his bones.
- <sup>19</sup> May it be like a garment that he wraps around himself,  
like a belt that he wears every day.”

Similarly **Psalm 137:7-9** which is brutal in its passion for retaliation.

- <sup>7</sup> Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem's fall,  
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!"
- <sup>8</sup> O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!
- <sup>9</sup> Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!

These Psalms are not given an acceptable place in conventional Christian faith.

Another way in which Christianity is selective in its use of the Psalms is to accept some Psalms but screen out certain verses. **Psalm 145** is a wonderful prayer of trust, until v.20b – "all the wicked he will destroy." It comes as a shattering negative which is usually omitted from Christian liturgy. at the end and is usually left off.

**Psalm 9:1-7a** is a much-used call to worship:

- <sup>1</sup> O come, let us sing to the LORD;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
- <sup>2</sup> Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
- <sup>3</sup> For the LORD is a great God  
and a great King above all gods.
- <sup>4</sup> In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.
- <sup>5</sup> The sea is his, for he made it,  
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.
- <sup>6</sup> O come, let us worship and bow down;  
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
- <sup>7a</sup> For he is our God,  
and we are the people of his pasture  
and the sheep of his hand.

But vv. 7b-11 are judged excessively concrete and negative, and to be avoided:

- <sup>7b</sup> O that today you would listen to his voice!
- <sup>8</sup> Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,  
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
- <sup>9</sup> when your ancestors tested me  
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
- <sup>10</sup> For forty years I loathed that generation  
and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,  
and they do not regard my ways."
- <sup>11</sup> Therefore in my anger I swore,  
"They shall not enter my rest."

However, most Psalms are unobjectionable to Christian faith, and Christian practice is to stay on this "safe ground."

## **2.2 The NT is superior to the OT**

This approach looks on the NT as superior to OT Jewishness and replaces it. Accordingly Christian use of the Psalms can safely disregard that which it finds "objectionable" in them. With this approach, Jewish themes are kept, but spiritualized and are no longer taken to refer to original context in which the Psalms were composed. A good example is the manner in which Jerusalem is dealt with in the Psalms:

### **Psalm 122:6-9**

- <sup>6</sup> Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
“May they prosper who love you.  
<sup>7</sup> Peace be within your walls  
and security within your towers.”  
<sup>8</sup> For the sake of my relatives and friends  
I will say, “Peace be within you.”  
<sup>9</sup> For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,  
I will seek your good.

### **Psalm 147:2**

- <sup>2</sup> The LORD builds up Jerusalem;  
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.

In the Christian adaptation of these Psalms, “Jerusalem” is now seen as the heavenly city, and not to the actual historical city.

Another long-standing practice, going back to the early Church, is to treat the Psalms as claims about Jesus Christ. The early Church Fathers took this approach in their writings and have a tendency to find hints about the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus at many points in the Psalms.

How do we evaluate these approaches? Not easily. They certainly seem to make the Psalms more readily available for Christian use. But “spiritualizing” the psalms tends to tone them down and avoid the abrasive and offensive elements in them. Even in our praying the Psalms, it might be more helpful to avoid such “spiritualizing” practices. Our praying them might be more genuine and our faith more authentic if we engage with them as poetic prayers about our common humanity. This means being more attentive to the rawness of Jewish faith out of which the Psalms speak.

There is another approach to praying the Psalms that might be more helpful. We remember that Jesus prayed these prayers. He did so as a Jew. The entire tradition of Christian prayer and Christian use of the Psalms must be seen in this light. This gives allows us to interpret the Psalms in terms of Jesus while never being far separated from the Jewish character of the material. Because of the Holocaust, we are at a new place in Jewish-Christian dialogue. We are at a new place where we must take each other with a new kind of seriousness, despite any difficulties. It is clear that either selectivity or spiritualizing in fact simply avoids the strong Jewishness of the Psalms. The Jewishness of the Psalter must be faced not for the sake of the Jews, not out of respect because we are “persons of good will,” not out of a notion of empathy. Rather, the Jewishness of the Psalms must be faced because our spirituality is diminished and trivialized if we neglect the Jewishness that belongs to our own

tradition and practice of faith. It is for **our** sake and not the sake of the Jews that we make this dimension of the Psalms our own.

### **3.0 Praying the Psalms**

#### **3.1 Praying for Jews**

Jesus' own practice and the Jewishness of the Psalms invites us to pray **for** the Jews. This is not meant in any condescending way, as if our prayers matter more than theirs. Nor does it mean praying for conversion of the Jews. Where we have come to in Jewish-Christian dialogue excludes this as we share aspects of faith in common. Praying for the Jews means praying for the deepest longings, echoes, and yearnings of the Jews, because these are the model of the deepest longings and yearnings of all of us. In them we may hear even our own profound sighs. Most of these Jewish aches and yearnings have to do with Jerusalem. That means we recognize how persistent is the zeal for Jerusalem / Zion in the Psalms. This is so because the completed Psalter was undoubtedly shaped by priestly and/or political interests for whom Jerusalem is the centre of the universe. So there is a "Jerusalem ideology" in the Psalms. However, Jerusalem is also an assurance of God's presence near his creation and among his people. Jerusalem also holds the promise of a world of justice and peace – themes that are close to the Christian heart too:

#### **Isaiah 2:2-4**

<sup>2</sup>In days to come  
the mountain of the LORD's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
all the nations shall stream to it.

<sup>3</sup>Many peoples shall come and say,  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup>He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war anymore.

The reality of Jerusalem keeps alive among us that God's plans for the world are not finished and that something more is promised.

### 3.2 Praying with Jews

Jesus' own practice and the Jewishness of the Psalms invites us to pray with Jews. Our own prayer life can be too focused on our own issues in a spirit of individualism. The Psalms encourage us to be genuinely ecumenical. We ask ourselves "which Jews pray these Psalms with passion?" A parade of victims comes to our imagination. The frightened victims of anti-Semitism. The Jews in our own culture who are forever displaced and always at the brink of rejection and hate. When we pray with Jews we become aware of the solidarity with the chosen of God whom the world rejects. We remember that God stands by and with and for those whom the world rejects.

When we pray with Jews it has implications for our Christian spirituality:

- We remember that Jewish history is part of our faith history. Look up Psalms 78; 105; 106 and 136. They tell of a history of betrayal and disobedience, of surprise and deliverance. It's a history of victims and marginal people. But it is also a history of grasping and not trusting and thereby bringing trouble. That history may function as a critique of our own history, one on which we may count too heavily – a history of a triumphal church or of an intolerant culture. Praying with Jews may lead us to greater conversion as Christians.
- Jews cannot pray very long without meditating on the Torah (Psalms 1; 19; 119). Jewish preoccupation with the Torah is hard-nosed realism about the given norms of our life, about the ethical context of our faith, about the public character of true religion. The Torah at the centre reminds us that the primary mode of faithfulness and knowing God is obedience. Praying these Psalms means recognizing that there is a God-ordained structuring of reality. Life has a moral coherence on which we can rely. Our obedience makes a difference to the keeping of God's promises.
- To pray with Jews means to live with knowledge of God's judgement. The Psalms remind us that that God takes us seriously and will let us have what we choose (Psalms 1:4-6; 2:7; 50:16-18; 145:20). But the Psalms also remind us that God can override our ways. This is a tension that lies at the heart of spirituality in the Psalms. The tension is that God gives us permission to choose our futures and, at the same time, God chooses a future for us that is gracious beyond our choosing.

To pray with Jews means to recognise a living God who will not let us settle easily or for too long. And the gift of the Jews in this literature is that we may be engaged with this very same God.

## 4.0 The Psalms and Christian Spirituality

There are five dimensions of Jewishness which mark the Psalms that might be significant to Christian spirituality.

### *The Psalms have a definite focus*

They do not make sweeping generalizations. Their imagery and speech is pointed and specific. This is true of the references to Zion, to king and, to enemies. They are specific about commandments and about angers, loves, and hopes. They challenge our way of prayer when we want to pray “in general” without focusing anywhere. They do not allow for a generalized religious consciousness and are offended by any concept of God that is vague or non-specific and which ignores God’s care for the “nobodies” of the world.

### **Psalm 145:14**

- <sup>14</sup> The LORD upholds all who are falling  
and raises up all who are bowed down.
- <sup>15</sup> The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food in due season.
- <sup>16</sup> You open your hand,  
satisfying the desire of every living thing.
- <sup>17</sup> The LORD is just in all his ways  
and kind in all his doings.
- <sup>18</sup> The LORD is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.
- <sup>19</sup> He fulfils the desire of all who fear him;  
he also hears their cry and saves them.
- <sup>20</sup> The LORD watches over all who love him,  
but all the wicked he will destroy.

### Compare with **Luke 7:22-23**

<sup>22</sup> And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight; the lame walk; those with a skin disease are cleansed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>23</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”



The Psalms are “embodied” prayers.

*There is little or no disconnect between what is thought / felt and what is said*

The Psalms are immediate. There is no effort to censor, or filter what is going on. This directness reflects a readiness to risk engaging with God from whom no secrets are hidden. The Psalms are marked with a robustness and candour with God. They are the prayers of the liberated, who in their freedom are able to speak in a way without ornamentation. Liberated prayer of this kind is filled with passion and conviction that in these words something is at issue that can be resolved in more than one way. And which of the ways of resolution depends on how the one praying engages God. In this identity of thought / feeling and speech, the Psalms overcome the calculating and careful distance that characterizes very much “polite” piety. Prayer stays remarkably close to the realities of life in these poems.

*The Psalms are particularly frank in expressing hatred and anger*

There is no thought here that Israel must be on good behaviour in the presence of God. Everything at work in life is readily expressed. Life is known to be conflicted. And therefore, the practice of conflicted and conflicting speech is necessary. Israel at prayer is ready to carry on a verbal assault against its enemies, one of whom is sometimes God. Anger is here in abundance. And anger is topped by hatred. The true believer hates powerfully and believes that the God of Israel also hates:

**Psalm 139:21-22**

<sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?  
<sup>22</sup> I hate them with perfect hatred;  
I count them my enemies.

In the Psalms, God is never passive or indifferent. We are naturally uncomfortable that such Psalms readily identify human hatred with that of God. But in the moment of hatred, that is what happens to all of us. This anger is psychologically honest. It asserts what each of us in our moment of insane hatred can do. The rage goes even further in that it can even be turned against God.

### Israel has an equal passion for hope

Elie Wiesel (1928 – 2016), that most remarkable survivor of the Holocaust, has said that what makes a Jew a Jew is this inability to quit hoping. Jewishness consists in “going on,” in persisting, in hoping. He writes:

What I learned from him is what, of all my knowledge, I value most. He made me aware that to be a Jew is to place the greatest store in knowledge and loyalty, that it is because he recognizes divine justice that he speaks out against human injustice. That it is because a Jew remains attached to his God that he is permitted to question Him. It is because the prophets loved the people of Israel that they admonished them and reprimanded their Icings. Everything depends on where you stand, my master used to say. With God anything can be said. Without God nothing is heard. Without God what is said is not said.<sup>2</sup>

Hope is the conviction of a new world. A new gift from God is at work on our behalf. And this new gift from God is at work, critiquing, dismantling, and transforming the present age which is so characterized by injustice and enmity. It is characteristically Jewish to hope for newness from God, from this specific God who is a giver of newness.

#### **Psalm 71:5.14-15**

<sup>5</sup> For you, O Lord, are my hope,  
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.  
<sup>14</sup> But I will hope continually  
and will praise you yet more and more.  
<sup>15</sup> My mouth will tell of your righteous acts,  
of your deeds of salvation all day long,  
though their number is past my knowledge.

### Vengeance

The most striking and problematic element for Christians in Jewish prayer is the readiness to seek vengeance.

#### **Psalm 109:6-20**

<sup>6</sup> They say, “Appoint a wicked man against him;  
let an accuser stand on his right.  
<sup>7</sup> When he is tried, let him be found guilty;  
let his prayer be counted as sin.

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<sup>2</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 380.

- <sup>8</sup> May his days be few;  
may another seize his position.
- <sup>9</sup> May his children be orphans  
and his wife a widow.
- <sup>10</sup> May his children wander about and beg;  
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.
- <sup>11</sup> May the creditor seize all that he has;  
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.
- <sup>12</sup> May there be no one to do him a kindness  
nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.
- <sup>13</sup> May his posterity be cut off;  
may his name be blotted out in the second generation.
- <sup>14</sup> May the iniquity of his father be remembered before the LORD,  
and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out.
- <sup>15</sup> Let them be before the LORD continually,  
and may his memory be cut off from the earth.
- <sup>16</sup> For he did not remember to show kindness  
but pursued the poor and needy  
and the brokenhearted to their death.
- <sup>17</sup> He loved to curse; let curses come on him.  
He did not like blessing; may it be far from him.
- <sup>18</sup> He clothed himself with cursing as his coat;  
may it soak into his body like water,  
like oil into his bones.
- <sup>19</sup> May it be like a garment that he wraps around himself,  
like a belt that he wears every day.”
- <sup>20</sup> May that be the reward of my accusers from the LORD,  
of those who speak evil against my life.

We do not simply observe these factors as interesting items in the Psalms. Rather, the Psalms are an invitation to transform our piety and liturgy in ways that will make both piety and liturgy somewhat more challenging. The tension we face in the Psalms (and everywhere in the Old Testament) is the tension between largeness of vision and a passion for the particular. This certainly proves to be a significant stumbling block for Christians.

## 5.0 Group Work

### Read **Psalm 28:1-9**

- <sup>1</sup> To you, O LORD, I call;  
my rock, do not refuse to hear me,  
for if you are silent to me,  
I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.
- <sup>2</sup> Hear the voice of my supplication,  
as I cry to you for help,  
as I lift up my hands  
toward your most holy sanctuary.
- <sup>3</sup> Do not drag me away with the wicked,  
with those who are workers of evil,  
who speak peace with their neighbours  
while mischief is in their hearts.
- <sup>4</sup> Repay them according to their work  
and according to the evil of their deeds;  
repay them according to the work of their hands;  
render them their due reward.
- <sup>5</sup> Because they do not regard the works of the LORD  
or the work of his hands,  
he will break them down and build them up no more.
- <sup>6</sup> Blessed be the LORD,  
for he has heard the sound of my pleadings.
- <sup>7</sup> The LORD is my strength and my shield;  
in him my heart trusts;  
so I am helped, and my heart exults,  
and with my song I give thanks to him.
- <sup>8</sup> The LORD is the strength of his people;  
he is the saving refuge of his anointed.
- <sup>9</sup> O save your people and bless your heritage;  
be their shepherd and carry them forever.

Discuss the following questions:

- What specific human or religious experience is addressed by the Psalmist?
- What are the key words which identify this experience?
- Where do you find candour in the Psalm?
- Is there any vengeance in the Psalm?
- If so how do you understand it?
- What do make of v.5?
- How do you understand vv.6-9? What do you think is going on here?
- In vv.8-9 there is a movement from the Psalmist to the People of Israel? Why so do you think?
- How might you pray this Psalm?