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## Psalm 2 and the MLF (Moabite Liberation Front)\*

I stand to be corrected, but I believe that every interpretation of and commentary on this psalm ever written adopts the viewpoint of the text, and, moreover, assumes that the readers addressed by the scholarly commentator share the ideology of the text and its author.<sup>1</sup> They take for granted that we are all of

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps I should reckon an article by Hans Klein ('Zur Auslegung von Psalm 2. Ein Beitrag zum Thema: Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit', *Theologische Beiträge* 10 [1979], pp. 63-71) the exception that proves the rule. His theme is the question whether Christians should use force to achieve good ends, and he examines Psalm 2 because it apparently authorizes force in the service of God. He concludes that historical reality shows that 'Israel very quickly had to learn that the way of the execution of power that Psalm 2 contains is not a possibility for the people of God' (p. 67), and that 'the Bible shows through the praxis of the interpretation of Psalm 2 that the use of power has no place in the church' (p. 71). But I saw in the article no direct confrontation with the claims of the text, and I was suspicious of the attempt to 'redeem' the text by insisting that it should not be interpreted 'in isolation' but 'within the total biblical picture' (p. 71 n. 35).

No doubt I should also mention the occasional remarks of commentators of an earlier age who let slip their discomfort with the psalm from their own Christian perspective; thus Bernhard Duhm: 'This psalm can be

the same opinion—author, commentator and reader. In this essay, I want to expose the tensions that exist among these parties, tensions between author and commentators (generally suppressed) and tensions between commentators and readers (generally ignored). The text is not only about conflict; it generates conflict, a conflict of ideologies.

### 1. *The World of the Text*

The psalm takes its rise from a conflict, and it is wholly concerned with how that conflict is to be handled. The conflict it represents is between Yahweh, his anointed one and the poet on the one hand, and the nations and their rulers on the other hand. There is therefore more than one set of interests at stake in the world of the text. One might have thought that scholars writing on this psalm would do their utmost not to appear partisan towards one of the parties in the conflict but to evaluate the variant claims of the protagonists in the detached and objective manner that scholarship traditionally aspires to. Such is not the case.

In order to bring into the foreground the conflict, and to begin to represent the position of the party that is systematically repressed both within the text and within the scholarly tradition, I find it necessary to give a name to those who are known within the poem as the enemies, the ‘nations’ and the ‘peoples’ of v. 1, the ‘kings of the earth’ and the ‘rulers’ of v. 2 and v. 10. It is a well-known feature of polemic that opponents are denied a recognition of their own identity, as human beings in their own right.<sup>2</sup> Here too those on one side of the conflict bear specific

appropriated by Christianity only with severe alteration’ (*Die Psalmen* [Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament, 14; Freiburg i.B.: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1899], p. 9), and Hermann Gunkel: ‘The Christian church could base itself on this psalm only after very considerable excisions’ (*Die Psalmen, übersetzt und erklärt* (Handcommentar zum Alten Testament, II/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 5th edn, 1968 [original edn, 1892], p. 10). They would like to normalize the psalm to Christian standards, nevertheless.

<sup>2</sup>. See, by way of analogy, the remarks of J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (*Journal for the Study of*

names: Yahweh, his anointed, his king, his son; and they are located at a particular place on the face of the globe: on Yahweh's holy hill of Zion. On the other hand, their opponents are called only by the most general of terms, nations, peoples, kings and rulers, and they are to be found at no particular place on earth but, indeterminately, over the earth in general. I name these opponents of Yahweh and his anointed Israelite king 'Moabites'—not that I think for a moment that the rebellious people spoken of in the psalm are actually and precisely Moabite.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I am using 'Moabite' as a symbolic name for people who found themselves in bondage to an Israelite king and who desired liberation from their overlord.<sup>4</sup>

Such are the *dramatis personae* of the poem. Now, what is

the Old Testament Supplement Series, 163; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 176-77, on unnamed women in biblical narratives.

<sup>3</sup>. But suppose they were. Perhaps a detached observer would find it hard to tell the difference between the religions of the two nations. No doubt Julius Wellhausen was no detached observer, but his remarks provoke thought: 'Israel and Moab had a common origin, and their early history was similar. The people of Jehovah on the one hand, and the people of Chemosh on the other, had the same idea of the Godhead as head of the nation, and a like patriotism derived from religious belief,—a patriotism capable of extraordinary efforts, and which has had no parallel in the West either in ancient or in modern times' ('Moab', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [ed. W. Robertson Smith; Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 9th edn, 1878], XVI, pp. 533-36 [535]). In case a curious reader wonders, Was there then any difference between the two?, I continue the quotation: 'But, with all this similarity, how different were the ultimate fates of the two! The history of the one loses itself obscurely and fruitlessly in the sand; that of the other issues in eternity. One reason for the difference... is obvious. Israel received no gentle treatment at the hands of the world; it had to carry on a continual conflict with foreign influences and hostile powers; and this perpetual struggle with gods and men was not profitless, although the external catastrophe was inevitable. Moab meantime remained settled on his lees (Jer. xlviii.11), and corruption and decay were the result' (pp. 535-36). A mere accident of history, not the intrinsic quality of its religious ideas, that is to say, determined the survival of the Hebrew faith.

<sup>4</sup>. Bernard Gosse draws special attention to the parallels between the psalm and the prophetic oracles against Edom ('Le Psaume 2 et l'usage rédactionnel des Oracles contre les Nations à l'époque post-exilique', *Biblische Notizen* 62 [1992], pp. 18-24), so perhaps it would be better to envisage an *Edomite Liberation Front*. No matter.

*going on* in the psalm? Various nations of the earth have been subject to the Israelite king who sees himself as the appointee of the one universal god. These nations have now joined in a rebellion against this Jerusalem king, hoping to achieve freedom from Israelite rule: ‘Let us break their chains’, they say, ‘and throw off their fetters’. These non-Israelites represent themselves within the poem not simply as subject peoples or citizens of an empire not their own but as slaves, who are kept fast in bonds and fetters. Their uprising is a classic case of a national liberation movement, urging nothing but freedom from oppression. There is no word here of any desire to humiliate the Israelites, to wield power over them, to attack them or to punish them. The entire ambition of the ‘nations’ is to break the Israelite hold over them. Nor is there any wickedness or grossness in these nations that accounts for their flouting of Israelite rule. There is not even any heathen belief or false worship that impels their resistance to Yahweh and his king.<sup>5</sup> Their impulse is represented as nothing other than a desire for freedom from their bondage.

That is the situation from which the poem takes its rise—the exposition of the drama, narratologically speaking. The way in which this initial situation is ‘complicated’ is that on the Israelite side such a rebellion is resisted scornfully. The first indication of this Israelite point of view comes in the first sentence, where the narrator or speaking voice depicts the rebellion in an already prejudicial way. By casting the description of the conspiracy of the nations as a rhetorical ‘why?’-question, he means to say, by the very first word of the poem, that their attempt is doomed to failure. The ‘why?’ implies a negative answer, that their effort is a waste of time. And in the last word of the first sentence, ‘in vain’ (*qyr*), we recognize again that there is nothing remotely objective about this depiction but that a decisive judgment against the ‘nations’ is already built into the description of their rebellion, ‘smitingly stigmatised in anticipation as “vanity”’.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> As against Heinrich A. von Ewald, *Commentary on the Psalms* (trans. E. Johnson; London: Williams & Norgate, 1880), p. 148: ‘The discontented at bottom merely find the dominion of the religion and law of Jahvé oppressive, and desire to return to the old rudeness and licentiousness’.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Maclaren, *The Psalms* (The Expositor’s Bible; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1893), I, p. 13.

This is the parallelism of greater precision<sup>7</sup> with a vengeance: from the first line alone (v. 1a) we might not guess that the questions are indeed rhetorical, but the second line limits the ambiguity of the first beyond question. In the ‘surplus’ that line 2 offers—the qyr to which nothing in line 1 corresponds, and which compels the reader to go back over the whole couplet and reprocess the double question as more of a decision than a real question—lies the essence of the poem. The rebellion of the nations is, from the Israelite perspective, vain.

The response of the Israelites represented in the poem to the nations’ striving for liberation is, on the one hand, a depiction of their deity’s scorn at the nations’ aspirations and, on the other hand, a statement by the Israelite king of his right to their submission. He claims that his god has given him the nations as his possession, which he may rightfully and ideally rule with a sceptre of iron, and which he may destroy at his pleasure, like a potter’s vessel. In a word, the Israelite king as the holder of power and the Israelite poet as his propagandist refuse to countenance for a moment the ‘Moabite’ claim or to acknowledge that ‘Moabites’ have any right to self-determination or political autonomy.

By world standards and on a broad historical canvas, we might well allow that there is nothing especially ugly about such imperial resistance to nationalistic aspirations. In this case, unlike many in imperial history, the overlord does not resort to genocide, or to torture or cruel punishment of the leaders of the rebellion. The Israelite response is no worse than to claim that their deity is scornful of liberation movements, to threaten that the Jerusalem king will intensify the severity of his rule and will be perpetually irascible (v. 12), and to counsel submissiveness and fear. Nonetheless, the Israelite response is unmistakably and smugly typical of an insensitive imperial despotism.

## 2. *The Scholarly Tradition*

<sup>7</sup> See David J.A. Clines, ‘The Parallelism of Greater Precision. Notes from Isaiah 40 for a Theory of Hebrew Poetry’, in *New Directions in Hebrew Poetry* (ed. Elaine R. Follis; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 40; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), pp. 77-100.

In this section, I am trying to identify some of the principal tendencies of modern scholarship on the psalm when confronted by the conflict between Israel and the Moabite Liberation Front.

a. *A Myopic Tendency*

The most striking feature of the scholarly tradition on the Psalms is the almost total blindness of commentators to the ‘Moabite’ point of view, and the absence of any awareness that the text projects a situation of real conflict. The poem adopts the strategy of minimizing the importance of Israel’s opponents by making them figures of ridicule, and the commentators follow suit.

I say ‘almost total’, for there are a few signs that the ‘Moabite’ critique has obtruded into the consciousness of some—though only to be no sooner uttered than immediately suppressed. Here is Artur Weiser:

[M]ust we not persist in regarding it as the presumptuous utterance of an incomprehensible and intolerable arrogance when claims implying dominion over the whole world are here voiced for which no occasion can be found at any point in the history of Israel which would justify them?<sup>8</sup>

But he responds immediately to his own implicit critique of the psalm:

This question will be answered in the affirmative only by those who eyes remain fixed on the visible surface of history so that they do not comprehend the hidden motive forces of historical events which are controlled by God, the Lord of universal history... The king in Zion is the anointed of God... Such a view, if pondered over deeply enough, is not to be characterized as the expression of an arrogant presumption but as a vision granted to the assurance that comes by faith.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 111.

<sup>9</sup>. Weiser, *Psalms*, p. 111. Presumption is a terrible fault, we learn from the commentators on this psalm, and should only be ascribed to foreigners. A.A. Anderson helpfully explains how, despite appearances, the Israelite king in the poem is not himself presumptuous: his claims to universal rule signify simply that ‘As God’s regent (and adopted son), the King “exercised” a universal rule, even though to his contemporaries it appeared that his dominion extended only over Judah. Thus the glory of the Davidic king was a hidden one, made real only in the cult’ (*The Book of Psalms*.

The doubt that surfaced for a moment is quickly laid to rest by the assurance that comes by (Lutheran) faith.

Again, in reference to the claim that the Israelite king will shatter the nations of the earth, Weiser allows that it ‘appears to be a colossal exaggeration, if looked at from the standpoint of the purely internal history of Israel’ but it is in fact ‘the powerful expression of a strong faith in the miraculous might of God’.<sup>10</sup> The language of smashing one’s enemies like earthen vessels may be paralleled in the royal inscriptions of Egypt, but

it makes a difference whether words which bear a likeness to each other express the human lust for power, as they do in the oracles of the ancient East, or whether they bear witness to the vision of faith, as they do in the Old Testament, where man’s eyes are lifted up to the power of the divine Judge of the earth...<sup>11</sup>

The commentator cannot conceive that there is an alternative point of view already inscribed in his text, and cannot imagine that the very existence of that Moabite point already calls into question his own easy certainties.

#### b. *A Moralizing/Theologizing Tendency*

A second dominant impression this reader of commentaries on Psalm 2 receives is that of a ruthless moralizing or theologizing of the poem that prevails in current readings of it.

1. *The world of the text.* Now such a reading is in sharp contrast to the very striking absence of a moral or theological dimension in the psalm itself. The psalm indeed portrays opposition to the rule of the Jerusalem king, and so, by inference, to the authority of the god of Jerusalem, but it does not characterize the foreign opponents of the Jerusalemites as evil or malign. Their only crime in the psalm is that they want to be free of the rule of the

*Volume I: Introduction and Psalms 1–72* [New Century Bible; London: Oliphants, 1972], pp. 64-65). So that’s all right then. Quotation marks are truly *magic*, are they not? Siegfried Wagner at least raises the question whether such a representation in the cult might not perhaps be termed a ‘flight from reality’—though only, of course, to deny it (‘Das Reich des Messias. Zur Theologie der alttestamentlichen Königpsalmen’, *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 109 [1984], cols. 865-74 [870]).

<sup>10</sup>. Weiser, *Psalms*, p. 114.

<sup>11</sup>. Weiser, *Psalms*, p. 114.

king. Thus, even in the world of the text, the conflict between the Jerusalemites and the foreigners is first and foremost a political issue, not a *moral* one.

And it is not essentially a *religious* conflict, either. It is true that the poet represents the rebellion of the nations as ‘against’ Yahweh. But that does not mean, for the poet, that the nations deny that Yahweh is the true god, or that the Israelite cult properly prescribes the ways in which humans should offer worship to the divine, or some such theologoumenon. No doubt the foreign nations do in fact deny such things, but that is not where their rebellion lies. It is not because they cannot accept the truth of the Israelite religion or submit themselves to the worship of Yahweh that they are in rebellion; rather, it is because, finding themselves under the political hegemony of an Israelite emperor, they regard it as oppression.<sup>12</sup>

So, while the poet represents them as rebelling ‘against Yahweh’ (and against his anointed king), and as saying, ‘Let us break *their* chains’ (those of Yahweh and the king)—for no doubt it is *worse* to be rebelling against the god than merely against the king—when he actually describes their rebellion it is a political one, against the rule of an emperor, not a religious one, against the imposition of a religion.

We come to the same conclusion when we ask, Who is this Yahweh? What kind of a god is he? What does he do with humans and what does he expect of them? The answer within Psalm 2 must be: He authorizes and supports the Israelite king. He does not require worship, he does not lay down laws, he does not require ethical behaviour of humans, he does not, indeed, communicate with humans generally. He exists for one reason and for one reason only, in the world of this psalm—he guarantees the rights of the Israelite king over other nations. In that role, he rebukes nations for resisting the rule of the king, saying, ‘I have installed the king as my king’, he assures the king that he is his father, he promises the king that nations of the earth will become his property, and he authorizes him to smash them with an iron sceptre and to break them like pots. And if we

<sup>12</sup>. As against Anderson, for example, who thinks that ‘the universal rule of God was challenged by the worship of other gods’ and that Psalm 2 is therefore ‘essentially a statement of faith’ (*The Book of Psalms*, p. 65).

wonder what it might mean in v. 11 that the kings and rulers are advised to 'serve' Yahweh with fear, v. 12 seems to make plain that their service of Yahweh will consist—not of religious worship, as the term *db[* ('serve') might suggest,<sup>13</sup> but—of submission to the king. It is by kissing the king in subjection<sup>14</sup> that they will serve the god. In short, as far as the psalm is concerned, Yahweh's function as god is to authorize the political authority of the king.<sup>15</sup>

2. *The world of the commentary.* But what do we find when we read the commentaries? The *political* issue is suppressed, and the claim is made that it is essentially *moral* and *religious* issues that are at stake in the psalm. Thus, for example, one commentator writes that the psalmist 'phrases his question [in v. 1] with the prophet's scorn of creaturely presumption'<sup>16</sup>—and we all know that 'presumption' is a *moral* fault (at least, it is if you are a creature). But we are not dealing in this psalm with minor moral faults, of course, say the commentators; what is depicted in this psalm is the fundamental conflict between light and darkness, between cosmic good and evil: 'The theology of God's own king-

<sup>13</sup> Anderson reminds us that 'in its religious aspect [the term 'serve'] means to worship Yahweh, while politically it implies a submission to his vicegerent' (*The Book of Psalms*, p. 69). But he forbears to tell us which meaning he thinks it has here. A.F. Kirkpatrick had seen the issue clearly enough, when he wrote of v. 11 that 'political submission to Jehovah in the person of his representative is primarily intended', though the 'wider', religious sense of 'serve' and 'fear' should not be excluded (*The Book of Psalms, with Introduction and Notes* [Cambridge Bible; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891], p. 11).

<sup>14</sup> I find no difficulty in translating v. 12a 'kiss the son', but know of no parallel to kissing the feet of Yahweh—which is what the RSV urges the nations to do. It would be hard for a non-Israelite to work out how to kiss the feet of an aniconic god (I see that this point was also made by Winfried Thiel, 'Der Weltherrschaftsanspruch des jüdischen Königs nach Psalm 2', in *Theologische Versuche* 3 [1971], pp. 53-63 [59]).

<sup>15</sup> The issue of legitimacy and filiation, so prominent both in the psalm itself and in the commentaries (cf. for example, José J. Alemany, 'Interpretación mesiánica del salmo 2', *Cultura Bíblica* 32 [1975], pp. 255-77 [268]), deserves a gender analysis all of its own.

<sup>16</sup> John Eaton, *Psalms: Introduction and Commentary* (Torch Commentary; London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 32.

ship had always to reckon with the problem of rampant evil'.<sup>17</sup> '[T]he king is empowered by God to overcome all evil.'<sup>18</sup> The nations' rebellion is transcribed into the commentaries as an irreligious act, and the king's political authority is morphed to the god's religious authority. The poet is, on this reading, not speaking primarily of the king at all, but 'depicting the unlimited power of Yahweh over the whole earth... [T]he discontented rulers are told whom they are to fear—Yahweh, not his "anointed"'.<sup>19</sup> 'The outer scenes [of the psalm] describe...the attempt to break loose from the rule of God and the demand to become subject to the rule of God.'<sup>20</sup> And the major theological problem of the psalm for the commentators is not the ethical one of how other people are to be treated but a metaphysical one, that the psalm ascribes the title 'son of God' to a human monarch when we all know how the Old Testament insists on the incomparability and uniqueness of Yahweh.<sup>21</sup>

### c. A Universalizing Tendency

Because a god is involved in the action of this psalm, theologians among commentators (and it is generally thought to be a strength, not a weakness, in a commentator to hold an intellectual commitment to a non-Israelite religion) think that everything they know about the God of their own theology is true of the divine character in this poem. And since they think (being historically and culturally conditioned, like all of us) that a God worth the name must be a universal god, with universal powers and universal property rights, they take it for granted that the psalm presupposes the universal dominion of Yahweh. Thus we read in the commentaries of 'Yhwh, whose property remains the earth (cf. Ps. 24.1, etc.)',<sup>22</sup> and are told that '[T]he psalmist pro-

<sup>17</sup>. Eaton, *Psalms*, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup>. Eaton, *Psalms*, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup>. John I. Durham, 'Psalms', in *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (ed. Clifton J. Allen; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972), IV, 153-464 (174).

<sup>20</sup>. Erich Zenger, in Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Die Psalmen I: Psalm 1-50* (Die Neue Echter Bibel, 29; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993), p. 49.

<sup>21</sup>. See James W. Watts, 'Psalm 2 in the Context of Biblical Theology', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 12 (1990), pp. 73-91.

<sup>22</sup>. Zenger, in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, p. 54.

poses as a foregone conclusion that Yahweh is indeed Lord over all the earth',<sup>23</sup> and that behind the psalm lies 'the Israelite belief that Yahweh...is the Lord of the whole world and all its history'.<sup>24</sup> And the whole poem is sometimes said to be essentially about the divine power; Anderson, for example, in his commentary entitles it 'Man Proposes, God Disposes'.<sup>25</sup> Likewise the king is said to lay claim to a universal dominion: for example, 'His remarkable claim to a world-wide office and authority is made on the grounds of a prophetic faith'.<sup>26</sup>

But nothing in the psalm makes any such universal claims.<sup>27</sup> Those who are at present subject to 'Yahweh and his anointed' are 'nations' (μywg) and 'peoples' (μymal) who are represented by the conspiring 'kings of earth' ( raAyklm) and 'rulers' (μynzwr)—that is to say, not *all* the nations and not *all* the kings of the earth.<sup>28</sup> Then when Yahweh promises to the Jerusalem king 'nations' (μywg) as his inheritance (hljn) and 'ends of the earth' ( raAypsa) as his possession (hzja) he does not say *all* the nations and he need not mean by 'ends of the earth' *everything contained within the earth's boundaries*. We do not even know for sure that he is talking about the 'earth' and not just about the 'land', since r<a, could mean either.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, his promise to 'give' these nations to the king does not mean that he, Yahweh,

<sup>23</sup>. Durham, 'Psalms', p. 174. Cf. Charles Augustus Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Psalms* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906), I, p. 14: 'The Ps. conceives of Yahweh as sovereign of the nations'.

<sup>24</sup>. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 64.

<sup>25</sup>. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 63.

<sup>26</sup>. Eaton, *Psalms*, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup>. See further, David J.A. Clines, 'World Dominion in Psalm 2?' (forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup>. Bernhard Duhm is one of the very few commentators to remark that in v. 1 it cannot be all the nations who are meant, since v. 9 shows that some are still not subject to the Israelite king (*Psalmen*, p. 5).

<sup>29</sup>. T.K. Cheyne is in a minority among commentators in understanding ra as 'land' (*The Book of Psalms, Translated from a Revised Text with Notes and Introduction* [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1904], I, p. 6); most others do not even discuss which is the correct translation, but simply assume it means 'earth'. Isaiah Sonne, however, is clear that they are 'regional vassal kings' and that ra is 'the land of the Philistines' ('The Second Psalm', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 19 [1945–46], pp. 43–55 [45 n. 3]).

already ‘owns’ them or ‘rules’ them in some sense.<sup>30</sup> It is as the spoils of war that he is promising them to the king. That is why the king must first ‘ask’ for them. If they were the king’s right by way of patrimony, he would not need to ‘ask’ for them—not unless he was proposing to be a prodigal son and take his patrimony in advance. What is envisaged here is that the king will ‘ask’ Yahweh’s assent to and assistance in foreign wars of re-conquest he will undertake,<sup>31</sup> and thereupon Yahweh will deliver his enemies into his hand, to coin a phrase. Likewise, when Yahweh speaks of the king shattering them like a pot, he does not have in mind the peaceful transfer of property from his own title to that of the king. This is the language of an act of war, not of dominion or simple masterfulness.<sup>32</sup> People do not injure their own interest by shattering their property like a pot.

In short, in the scholarly tradition the psalm is about world dominion—whether of Yahweh or of the Israelite king—whereas in the world of the text it is about the king’s hopes for military victory over particular rebellious foreign nations.

#### d. *An Idealizing Tendency*

A recent tendency in Psalm criticism, which has the effect of

<sup>30</sup>. Cf. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Word Biblical Commentary, 19; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), p. 68: ‘Because God is a universal God, the earthly king’s jurisdiction is also represented in world-wide terms’.

<sup>31</sup>. So, rightly, J.A. Emerton, ‘The Translation of the Verbs in the Imperfect in Psalm ii. 9’, *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 29 (1978), pp. 497-503 (501): ‘[I]t is not a matter of conquering foreign peoples for the first time, but of subduing those who have previously been subject to the king in Jerusalem’.

<sup>32</sup>. Bob Becking has made clear that, in its Mesopotamian analogues, the image of smashing pots refers to the utter subjugation of enemies (as in historical inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II) and, famously, to the destruction of the earth by the flood (Atrahasis and Gilgamesh epics). See his ‘“Wie Töpfe sollst du sie zerschmeißen”: Mesopotamische Parallelen zu Psalm 2,9b’, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 102 (1990), pp. 59-79. John T. Willis also has rightly seen that the psalm as a whole is not about lordship but about battle, observing that ‘[t]he affirmation that Yahweh himself had set the Judean king on his throne is important in the flow of argument in the cry of defiance, but should not be magnified out of proportion in relationship to the psalm as a whole’ (‘A Cry of Defiance—Psalm 2’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 [1990], pp. 33-50 [45]).

deflecting criticism of its aggressiveness, has been to regard this psalm as originating, not from the royal cult of pre-exilic Israel, but from an oppressed postexilic community. Thus for Hossfeld and Zenger the admittedly 'aggressive' programme of Psalm 2 is not to be seen as the realistic and realizable ambition of a powerful state but as a hope and a vision of a threatened minority clinging to the promises of its god.<sup>33</sup> In similar vein Erhard Gerstenberger writes:

The psalmist/liturgist/theologian who composed and used Psalm 2 for synagogal worship services<sup>34</sup> wanted to strengthen Jewish identity in a world resounding with the noise of heathen armies and with the propaganda of alien gods. The writer insists that all the apparent strength of the nations and their gods is illusory. The real master of all the world is Yahweh, who one day will reveal the participation of his Anointed and his preferred people in the administration of the world. What a dream of greatness, and what a comfort and joy for the downtrodden, suffering Jewish communities!<sup>35</sup>

If this is the way an oppressed minority comforts itself, by aping the language and the ambitions of an oriental empire, then truly Assyria and Egypt have won the battle for hearts and minds, and it is their ideology that has triumphed. What benefit, we may ask, is it to an oppressed community to believe that the

<sup>33</sup>. Zenger, in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, p. 50-51. This is of course not a completely new tendency, for already Duhm, for example, was arguing that Psalm 2 represented the 'eschatological tension of the last centuries [BCE]' and was composed for the coronation of Aristobulus I or Alexander Jannaeus (*Die Psalmen*, pp. 10-11). So too more recently Marco Treves, 'Two Acrostic Psalms', *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965), pp. 81-85, claiming to find in it the acrostic 'Sing to Jannaeus the First and his Wife' (adequately refuted by Barnabas Lindars, 'Is Psalm ii an Acrostic Psalm?', *Vetus Testamentum* 17 [1967], pp. 60-67). But the more modern trend is to focus on the community experience rather than the political situation. Among other modern exponents of a postexilic origin is Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1, with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, 14; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 48.

<sup>34</sup>. Which is itself no doubt a fiction; see Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath and Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 122; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), denying the existence of Jewish services for worship until well into the Christian era.

<sup>35</sup>. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1*, p. 49.

strength of the nations is illusory? On the contrary, it is the very power of their overlords that has made them the oppressed; if that power is illusory, then so too is their suffering. The oppressed will never gain their freedom if their poets and religious leaders convince them that they have never lost it, that they have hidden resources and that they will 'one day' find themselves to be the real masters, administering the world from a position of power as 'preferred people'. This is nothing but an incitement to fantasize, not to engage with the real world. The psalm on this reading is not only a capitulation to the ideals of a savage imperialism but at the same time a recipe for quietism and defeatism.

On the part of commentators of our time, this approach represents an idealizing tendency, for it transmutes the violence of the psalm and its suppression of claims to national self-determination into the cry of a helpless minority who want justice more than they want power.

e. *Softening the Contours*

There are in this psalm some remarkably astringent elements, which the interpretative tradition tends to 'manage' and tone down. Among them four elements can be mentioned:

1. Yahweh's response of scorn to the nations' aspiration to independence.<sup>36</sup> The god of this psalm does not only deny independence to subject peoples, he pokes fun at them for suggesting they have any right to it. Commentators sometimes signal their disquiet at this divine response (a 'shrill anthropomorphism', Kraus calls it<sup>37</sup>), but make it their business to contain both the text and their own disquiet. The divine mockery becomes merely 'an expression of his sovereignty, majesty and loftiness'.<sup>38</sup> And, of course, we need to remember that 'Strictly speaking, God is not subject to anger or fury; his judgments are always tranquil;

<sup>36</sup>. No matter whether the laugh of Yahweh is 'a poetic expression for a peal of thunder' (Cheyne, *Psalms*, I, p. 5).

<sup>37</sup>. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Hilton C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 128.

<sup>38</sup>. Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, p. 129.

but he is metaphorically said to rage and be angry'.<sup>39</sup> His wrath, we are reminded, is 'not emotional irrationality, but underlines the passion with which he wants to restore the disturbed order'.<sup>40</sup> One commentator is reduced to remarking that at least God's reaction shows that 'the Almighty is able to share in human feelings'.<sup>41</sup> And another analyses punctiliously how this is not an outburst of laughter as a thoughtless reflex, nor wild laughter that releases tension, nor ironic laughter that is malicious and disrespectful—but simple laughter, which, 'imaginative and optimistic, underlines the comical side of individuals, encounters and the circumstances of life and which leads those who laugh to dissociate themselves from that at which they laugh while at the same time drawing to themselves those who surround them'.<sup>42</sup> It is good to know that the divine laughter is so circumspect. Looked at from the right point of view, indeed, one commentator opines, 'the laughter of the psalm is consistent with the tears of Jesus as he stood on Olivet',<sup>43</sup> the only problem is, like that of Archimedes, finding the place to stand in order to take such a point of view. On the whole, though, what we find is that commentators have rather little to say about the divine mockery—which is the most effective way of 'managing' it, of course.

2. The king's claim to a right to pulverize the nations. Mostly this savage language is 'managed' by transcribing it as a mere right to dominion or by insisting that it is nothing other than a picture—of the ease, for example, with which the king will reduce his opponents.<sup>44</sup> For Kraus it is no more than the statement of 'universal, judiciary absolute power'.<sup>45</sup> Alternatively, the language can be read as an expression of mere possibility. Long ago, Cardinal Bellarmine commented: "Break them in pieces" does not imply that Christ will actually do so, but that he

<sup>39</sup>. R. Bellarmine [d. 1621], *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* [trans. John O'Sullivan; Dublin: James Duffy, 1866], p. 3.

<sup>40</sup>. Zenger, in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, p. 53.

<sup>41</sup>. Anderson, *Psalms*, I, p. 66.

<sup>42</sup>. Louis Jacquet, *Les Psaumes et le coeur de l'homme: Etude textuelle, littéraire et doctrinale* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1975), I, pp. 230-31.

<sup>43</sup>. Maclaren, *Psalms*, I, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup>. Jacquet, *Les Psaumes*, p. 236.

<sup>45</sup>. Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, p. 133.

can do so if he wills; breaking their sins and infidelities in pieces, through his mercy...or breaking them in pieces in everlasting fire'.<sup>46</sup> Clearly this is a containment strategy with great staying power, for, much more recently, Anderson takes the same line: 'if need be, the King will defeat all his enemies',<sup>47</sup> and so too J.A. Emerton: 'A king may need to shatter his vassals if they rebel, even though he will hope that he will not have to resort to such action'.<sup>48</sup>

3. The rule of terror sanctioned by the deity. Yahweh rebukes the nations in his wrath and terrifies them in his anger, the king threatens them with crushing, and they are advised by the poet to serve Yahweh with fear and 'rejoice' (?) with trembling, to pay homage to the king lest he be angry, because his wrath can flare up in a moment. There is a lot of anger about in this poem, but it too is 'managed' by the commentators. Either the subject is not mentioned (the favourite method), or else it is argued that the air of irascibility that the psalm breathes does not tell the whole story. For example, 'By long-drawn-out, gentle patience He has sought to win to obedience (though that side of His dealings is not presented in this psalm), but the moment arrives when...sleeping retribution wakes at the right moment, determined by considerations inappreciable by us'.<sup>49</sup> 'The quick anger may sound like the touchiness of a despot', allows Derek Kidner, 'but the true comparison is with Christ, whose wrath (like his compassion) blazed up at wrongs which left His contemporaries quite unruffled. This fiery picture is needed alongside that of the one who is "slow to anger"'.<sup>50</sup> The anger that fills the psalm may be one-sided, that is to say, but it is necessary to a more whole and harmonious view of the divine.

4. The professed concern for the nations in vv. 10-12, coupled with the callous disregard of their own desires in the rest of the psalm. There is something unsavoury about a pedagogy that professes to teach wisdom and offer advice (v. 10) but is based

<sup>46</sup>. Bellarmine, *Psalms*, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup>. Anderson, *Psalms*, I, p. 68 (my italics).

<sup>48</sup>. Emerton, 'The Translation of the Verbs', p. 503.

<sup>49</sup>. Maclaren, *Psalms*, I, p. 16.

<sup>50</sup>. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 53.

upon contempt for its pupils (v. 1) and accompanied by threats of bullying (v. 9) and even capital punishment (v. 12). The threats are serious enough, so it is hard to see any genuine altruism in the appeal to reason in v. 10.

The commentators, however, want to swallow up the threats in the advice, the wrath in the love:

This Psalm opens the Psalter with a proclamation of God's love and a denunciation of God's wrath against those who reject it... God's mercy is not impaired by the declaration of His wrath, but if the awful reality of that wrath were withdrawn, the bright truth of God's Love would fade away into a twilight of moral indifference.<sup>51</sup>

What kind of love is it that brings denunciation if it is rejected? What sort of love is it that fades to moral indifference if it does not include wrath? Hell obviously hath no fury like a deity scorned. The tension between the protestations of concern and the threats of violence remains, and the poem will always begin where it begins, with scorn, and end where it ends, with death for all those who do not 'take refuge' in the God who rules from Zion.

A softening of the contours is especially notable in Christianizing ('messianic') interpretations of the psalm, which want to maximize the degree of fit between the king of Jerusalem and Jesus but, on the other hand, resist blurring the cleancut lines of the Christian Jesus with alien figurations. In such readings, the violence of the Israelite king is usually passed over in silence, the ideas of compulsion and subjugation are transcribed as divine sovereignty, the claims of the king are swallowed up in the universal lordship of Yahweh, and the king is messianized and transformed into a wisdom teacher and evangelist:

the Messiah calls the kings and rulers of earth to become servants of the reign of YHWH. He teaches the nations the fear of the Lord just as he teaches people obedience to the Torah of the Lord (in Psalm 1). To both he offers a better way than the way that offends the divine sovereignty.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup>. R.M. Benson, *The War-Songs of the Prince of Peace: A Devotional Commentary on the Psalms* (London: John Murray, 1901), I, pp. 70-71.

<sup>52</sup>. James Luther Mays, "In a Vision": The Portrayal of the Messiah in the Psalms', *Ex Auditu* 7 (1991), pp. 1-8 (3).

Or, more sophisticatedly,

In the view of the final redaction the (messianic) king in Zion lays hold, not of weapons, but of words, in order to move the kings of the nations on to the path towards the kingdom of God... The 'messianic' king here brings to realization, as 'teacher of the Torah', the eschatological vision of Isa. 42.1, 6; 49.6; 51.4.<sup>53</sup>

The commentators are encouraging us to forget the unpleasantness of the scornful laughter and the aggressive language of shattering, are they not? If we can end our experience of the poem with a nice taste in the mouth, of eschatological mission and conversion and an evangelical kingdom of God, all is well, and the text is more positive, more Christian and more humane than it sounded.

Of course, if the going gets too hard, it is always possible to jettison the offending element in the text in a 'critical' mode, by that very means heightening the authority of what has not been 'critically' excised. Thus for example, in an essay on 'Preparing to Preach on a Royal Psalm',<sup>54</sup> Delmar L. Jacobson writes that in the New Testament use of Psalm 2 there is

a startling turn of events: a new and contrary way which leads, not to the smashing of Messiah's enemies as announced in Psalm 2, but to the astonishment of Israel's enemies as announced in Isaiah 52:14-15.

This new and contrary way is a better way, naturally; and the Israelite king is textually punished by the commentator for not having been the messiah Jesus:

In reality, however, things did not turn out as pictured in Psalm 2... Indeed, the day came when the Davidic king himself was broken 'with a rod of iron' and the Davidic kingdom dashed 'in pieces like a potter's vessel'.

But at the same time it is not just for not living 'down' (we might say) to the meek self-sacrifice of the Suffering Servant for which the Davidic kings are to be blamed, but also for their not having lived 'up' to the fearsome and domineering splendour portrayed

<sup>53</sup> Zenger, in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, p. 54.

<sup>54</sup> Delmar L. Jacobson, 'The Royal Psalms and Jesus Messiah: Preparing to Preach on a Royal Psalm', *Word and World* 5 (1985), pp. 192-98 (197, 198).

in Psalm 2: ‘None of the successive Davidic kings achieved the greatness envisioned by the temple songs such as Psalms 2, 45, 72, and 110’. Coming down hard on the Israelite kings for not really achieving world dominion is perhaps the ultimate capitulation to the ideology of the psalm. Not only is there nothing wrong—if you’re an Israelite—with being brutal, the real fault is not being brutal enough.

*f. Hardening the Edges*

A contrary move on the part of commentators is to align themselves wholeheartedly with the savagery of the psalm, and to find justification for their totalitarian instincts in its wording. Whereas my complaint, when I find the contours of the psalm softened, is against the commentator for denaturing the psalm, here it is more against the psalm for authorizing and encouraging the commentator. Does the psalm bear no responsibility for the interpretations it licenses?

Here is one such hardening of the edges of the vision of Psalm 2, still firmly in the political sphere:

[H]istory is nothing else than a prolonged exhibition of the scorn of God for human pride... Three hundred years ago the king of Spain equipped a huge fleet and despatched it against England, to chastise that heretical land and bring her under the papal yoke... Trusting in their strength the Spaniards reckoned on victory; but there were two factors of which they had taken no account: one, the valour of the English seamen...and the other, and by far the greater, the scorn of Him who sate in the heavens. He blew upon them, and they were scattered; He sent forth a mighty wind into the sea and drove them along the Channel and up into the cold North Sea... [O]f all that vast Armada only fifty-three...got home to Spain, with but a poor remnant of broken and dispirited men to tell how He that is enthroned in the heavens had laughed and mocked at them.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> David Smith, ‘Biblical Laughter’, *The Expository Times* 12 (1900–1901), pp. 546–49 (548–49), quoted in *The Speaker’s Bible. The Book of Job. Psalms I* (ed. James Hastings; Aberdeen: The ‘Speaker’s Bible’ Offices, 1924), pp. 285–86.

I should add that the ‘Speaker’s Bible’ was so called because it was commissioned by the Speaker of the House of Commons; this commentary series was therefore not simply a churchly production of a bygone age but had a certain place, and an authority, in British political life.

This jingoistic rendering of the psalm, it should be noted, is not the private interpretation of some marginal author of a more uncouth age, but belongs to the mainstream of British biblical interpretation in this century. It is to be found in *The Speaker's Bible*, a compilation by the James Hastings who edited *The Expository Times*, *The Dictionary of the Bible*, and *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. The aim of *The Speaker's Bible*, according to its distinguished editor, was 'to preserve all that is worth preserving of the modern interpretation of the Bible'—a sobering thought.

And here is another instance of a hardening of the edges:

The second Psalm is one of the best Psalms. I love that Psalm with my heart. It strikes and flashes valiantly amongst kings, princes, counsellors, judges, etc. If what this Psalm says be true, then are the allegations and aims of the papists stark lies and folly. If I were as our Lord God, and had committed the government to my son, as he to his Son, and these vile people were as disobedient as they now be, I would knock the world to pieces.<sup>56</sup>

Luther, of course. It is a classic example of the pernicious influence of the psalm's violence, as well as of the use of the psalm as a vehicle for the interpreter's own anger.

g. *Refusal to Draw the Implications of Ancient Near Eastern Parallels*  
There is a considerable literature pointing out the detailed parallels between the wording of this psalm and ancient Near Eastern literatures.<sup>57</sup> But it is not recognized that the closer the analogy

<sup>56</sup>. I have a notation that this is from Martin Luther's *Table Talk*, but I cannot now find the source. I searched *Luther's Works*. 54. *Table Talk* (ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), the six volumes of *Tischreden* in the Weimar edition of Luther's works, and the extra *Tischreden* in vol. XLVIII, pp. 365-719, all to no avail. Nor is the passage to be found in Luther's voluminous writings on Psalm 2 in his *Lectures on the Psalms* (*Luther's Works*, XII [ed. Jaroslav Pelikan: St Louis: Concordia, 1958], pp. 4-93, and XIV [ed. Jaroslav Pelikan: St Louis: Concordia, 1955], pp. 313-49. But no one can doubt that the passage is from Luther! For another example of the influence of this psalm, see the Koran, Sura 2.14.

<sup>57</sup>. See for example Gerhard von Rad, 'The Royal Ritual in Judah', in his *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (trans. E.W. Trueman Dicken;

between the Hebrew text and the ancient Near Eastern texts, the stronger the case for believing that this psalm represents the ideologies of world empires like Babylonia and Egypt that are, by most accounts, inimical to the theology of the Hebrew Bible.

Artur Weiser, for example, recognizes that the setting of the psalm (which he identifies as that of a world-wide rule of the Israelite king) ‘copie[s] a foreign pattern...[,] that of the court etiquette of the great empires of the ancient Orient and of its royal cult’<sup>58</sup> and ‘borrow[s] the setting...of victories over the other nations and of dominion over the whole world, from foreign prototypes’.<sup>59</sup> But he wants to insist that

If two people say the very same thing, it is nevertheless not the same thing. The oracles of the ancient East impart to the historical aspirations of the kings for power a greater energy by the promise of divine help; the emphasis is, however, on the internal affairs of the nation in question. In the Old Testament, on the other hand, the internal historical events—in our present context the kingship in Zion—are recognized as bearers of a divine will which transcends history and for that reason encompasses it totally—both as regards space and time—and that divine will bursts the narrow bounds which limit the internal historical events...and makes these events the blueprint of and the signal for that divine judgment which in terms of space is universal and in terms of time is final (eschatological).<sup>60</sup>

It goes without saying that from a Moabite point of view—or indeed from any point of view that does not identify with the

Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966), pp. 222-31 [original, ‘Das jüdische Königsritual’, *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 72 (1947), cols. 211-16 (= his *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* [Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1958], pp. 205-13)]; Thiel, ‘Der Weltherrschaftsanspruch’; Victor Sasson, ‘The Language of Rebellion in Psalm 2 and the Plaster Texts from Deir ‘Alla’, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 24 (1986), pp. 147-54; Albert Kleber, ‘Ps. 2:9 in the Light of an Ancient Oriental Ceremony’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 5 (1943), pp. 63-67. Oriental analogies to kissing the feet of a ruler (not otherwise attested in the Hebrew Bible) are conveniently summarized by Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, p. 8.

<sup>58</sup>. Weiser, *Psalms*, p. 110.

<sup>59</sup>. Weiser, *Psalms*, p. 113. Similarly Zenger, in Hossfeld and Zenger, whose first sentence on Psalm 2 is: ‘In the background stands the ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian view of world order’ (*Die Psalmen I*, p. 53).

<sup>60</sup>. Weiser, *Psalms*, p. 114.

world of the text—this is special pleading. If such language as we encounter in the psalm signifies in its ancient Near Eastern analogues a lust for royal power, a disinterested observer will need a lot of convincing that it means something totally different in the psalm.<sup>61</sup>

Here is another example, this time from a learned and eloquent preacher rather than a professional scholar:

The lower half of the picture is all eager motion and strained effort; the upper is full of Divine calm... He needs not to rise from His throned tranquillity, but regards undisturbed the disturbances of earth. The thought embodied is like that expressed in the Egyptian statues of gods carved out of the side of a mountain, 'moulded in colossal calm', with their mighty hands laid in their laps and their wide-opened eyes gazing down on the little ways of the men creeping about their feet.<sup>62</sup>

So, we must conclude, for the Christian interpreter the theology of Egypt was in the right after all, and we may be grateful that the Hebrew poet had the breadth of vision to lay under tribute the wisdom of his erstwhile national oppressor. Or, to abandon the irony, is it not amazing that so many can see the parallels with the ancient Near East, and so few can see their significance?<sup>63</sup>

#### *h. Sweeping Politics under the Aesthetic Rug*

The 'beauty' and dramatic force of the psalm have often been remarked on. For example:

This song is a noble outburst of these truly great reflections, these sublime sentiments... This is the type of a perfect song, blending in itself rest and unrest, contemplation and sensibility in the finest manner... This beautiful song must necessarily proceed from the

<sup>61</sup>. A similar observation is also made by Thiel, 'Der Weltherrschaftsanspruch', p. 58.

<sup>62</sup>. Maclaren, *Psalms*, I, p. 15.

<sup>63</sup>. It is to the credit of Winfried Thiel ('Der Weltherrschaftsanspruch') that he raises the issue at all, that he critiques both Weiser's and Kraus's attempts to deal with it, and that he proposes his own. I must say, however, that the claim that the Old Testament itself offers 'corrections' to the theology of Psalm 2 ('Der Weltherrschaftsanspruch', p. 59) does not for me remove the scandal of the text (any more than in the essay by Klein, in note 1 above).

most splendid period of the kingdom...<sup>64</sup>

...this splendid but commonly misunderstood psalm...<sup>65</sup>

...this magnificent lyric...<sup>66</sup>

...this beautiful poem...<sup>67</sup>

[Verses] 1-3 place us, in masterly fashion, immediately into the situation... For its power, its vividness and its precise language, Psalm 2 has few equals.<sup>68</sup>

In sublime language, and with great dramatic power, [the nations] are rebuked for their folly...<sup>69</sup>

Its author, a master of words full of great poetical power and bold ideas ...<sup>70</sup>

The psalm is effective and dramatic in its literary style.<sup>71</sup>

The four sections/scenes form an artistic composition.<sup>72</sup>

The poetry in v 9 presents this regal authority in a dramatic manner...<sup>73</sup>

There comes a point, however, when one wonders whether this chorus of approval for the psalm's aesthetic qualities is not a systematic deflection of attention from its political intention and its ethical shortcomings. I do not mean to dissent from the critics' universal praise, but simply to ask: If we may make aesthetic judgments about this text, may we not also make ethical ones?<sup>74</sup>

<sup>64</sup>. Ewald, *Commentary on the Psalms*, pp. 148, 149.

<sup>65</sup>. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup>. Maclaren, *Psalms*, I, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup>. Hans Schmidt, *Die Psalmen* (Handbuch zum Alten Testament, I/15; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1934), p. 6.

<sup>68</sup>. Duhm, *Psalmen*, pp. 5, 10.

<sup>69</sup>. W.T. Davison, *The Psalms, I-LXXII* (Century Bible; Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, n.d.), p. 50.

<sup>70</sup>. Weiser, *Psalms*, p. 109.

<sup>71</sup>. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, p. 65.

<sup>72</sup>. Zenger, in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, p. 49.

<sup>73</sup>. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, p. 67.

<sup>74</sup>. In this I am entirely at one with Wayne C. Booth's vigorous attempt to restore 'ethical criticism' to our literary agenda; see his *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

i. *The Inscription of Ideology in Modern Translations*

There must be very few biblical scholars<sup>75</sup> who did not first read this psalm in Hebrew but in a modern translation in their own language. But no one ever seems to notice that their interpretation of the psalm must have been in important respects controlled and determined by the ideology of the modern versions they grew up with.

1. We have already seen how the use of the definite article in vv. 1, 2 and 8 (the nations, the peoples, the kings of the earth, the rulers, the nations, the ends of the earth) universalize the psalm. Can it be that scholars do not question the idea of universal dominion in this psalm because they have always 'known' that it is about 'the' nations and 'the' peoples?

2. I have also already noted how translating the term  $\text{r} < \text{a}$ , as 'world, earth' rather than 'land' likewise predetermines the reader, and even the scholar familiar with Hebrew, to see in the psalm an unambiguous reference to world dominion.

3. Another ideological decision that has been imported into translations of the psalm is that it concerns Yahweh's universal lordship and the delegation of his dominion to the king (the NAB, for example, heads the psalm 'The Universal Reign of the Messiah'). Thus  $\mu[\text{eroT}]$  (v. 9), which is unmistakably 'you will break' (from  $[[\text{r}]$ , and which suits the parallelism of  $\mu\text{x}e\text{P}[\text{n}]\text{T}$ ) ('you will shatter', from  $\text{pn}$ ), is emended to  $\mu[\text{er}]\text{T}$  and translated 'you will rule' in the NIV and the NAB<sup>76</sup>—though 'break' in AV, RV, RSV, JB, NJB, NEB, REB, GNB and 'smash' in NJPS. This is evidently a Christianizing rendering, given contemporary currency both by an evangelical Protestant and by

<sup>75</sup>. I am obviously leaving out of account at this point those for whom Hebrew is a native language.

<sup>76</sup>. On the basis of the Septuagint  $\text{poimanei} \sim 1$  and the Vulgate *reges* (cf. also Rev. 2.27  $\text{poimanei}$ ), Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, I, p. 22, among others, think 'rule' is 'more suited to the context of the sceptre, even if it be of iron'. And it is more recently defended by G. Wilhelmi, 'Der Hirt mit dem eiseren Szepter. Überlegungen zu Psalm ii 9', *Vetus Testamentum* 27 (1977), pp. 196-204, and by Emerton, 'The Translation of the Verbs', p. 502; but see, to the contrary, J. Alberto Soggin, 'Zum zweiten Psalm', in *Wort-Gebot-Glaube: Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments. Walther Eichrodt zum 80. Geburtstag* (ed. Hans Joachim Stoebe et al.; *Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments*, 59; Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1970), pp. 191-207.

a Roman Catholic translation.

4. Perhaps the most conspicuous example of how theological and ideological interpretations of the psalm have been inscribed and enshrined in modern English translations is the capitalizations of the NIV. The 'Anointed One', the 'King' and the 'Son' are not names for an Israelite king (in Ps. 45.1 [NIV], for example, the poet recites his verses for 'the king', with a lowercase 'k'). This is a blatant Christianization of the psalm, and yet another example of the ideology of the scholarly tradition.

### 3. *The Question of Ethics*

The tendency of this paper is toward showing that there is a question of ethics—hitherto largely unrecognized—both in the world of the text of Psalm 2 itself and also in the scholarly commentary on it, where the ethical problems raised by the psalm are only further compounded.

#### a. *In the World of the Text*

The primary ethical question raised by the psalm is, What is an appropriate response to assertions of national independence and claims to national self-determination? Any answers we give to this question, indeed any thoughts we have on the subject whatsoever, are subjectively ours, and more or less conditioned by our own historical and social location and experience. But if we are serious and autonomous people, they are ours, and therefore the only views we should, in my opinion, hold.

Now the text of Psalm 2 says that, when the nations seeking independence are non-Israelite and are seeking it from Israel, they should not have it. The poet is against it, the king is against it, and the god is against it. Psalm 2 is not in two minds on the matter. Any nation contemplating a liberation movement had better know that it will be resisted and that it will be scorned. If its leaders have any sense, they will bow in humble submission to the Israelite king and not risk his wrath.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>77</sup>. I am understanding rbAwqvn as 'kiss the son', though of course the reading and interpretation are much debated. See, for example, A.A. Macintosh, 'A Consideration of the Problems Presented by Psalm ii. 11 and 12', *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 27 (1976), pp. 1-14.

I myself, living in a post-imperialist culture, do not think very highly of this attitude. Moreover, I think it important, as a scholar engaged professionally with this psalm, to make my unease with it very plain—if for no other reason, because I should hate for anyone to construe my silence as consent or to take my neutral or ‘objective’ remarks about the text to signify any refusal or incapacity on my part to form ethical judgments.

But my unease with the psalm goes deeper, I believe, than my own ‘instinctive’ (which is to say, culturally conditioned but also ‘owned’ by myself) disagreement with its programme. For it is not just that the ideology of the psalm is in conflict with mine (and that of people I approve of): it is in conflict also with other streams of thought in its own culture—in ways that make its ideology questionable. In a word, while Israel is very happy to have been liberated itself, this psalm does not want anyone else to be liberated—and that seems to undermine the value Israel put on national freedom, and to render its attitude to freedom ambivalent and incoherent. It was apparently fundamental to Israelite national self-perception to remember itself as originating as a body of slaves escaped from Egypt. Whether or not it had historically been the case that Israel had come into being by way of liberation from imperial overlords, that is how Israel chose to construct its own history. Now Psalm 2 is not explicitly denying that construction of the past, but, in refusing a similar history to others, it implicitly does so, and thus denies the value of its own liberation.

It would not be so bad if Psalm 2 happened to promote a view that was simply in opposition to another view expressed in the Hebrew Bible. If it did, it would have a perfect right to do so, and it would not be for us to insist that the Hebrew Bible should display a uniform ideology. And it would not be so bad if it were just a question of our preferring another Hebrew Bible view about national autonomy to that expressed in this psalm, for we would have a perfect right to do that, and there is no obligation on any of us to approve of everything that is in the Hebrew Bible. What is so bad for me about Psalm 2’s ideology is, as I have just now suggested, not only that I do not approve of it but that it cannot sustain itself or justify itself in terms of Israel’s own self-awareness.

And that is the ethical problem of the text: the text is an act of bad faith, an attempt to deceive itself about the nature of reality.<sup>78</sup>

b. *In the World of the Commentator*

What happens in the world of the commentator on Psalm 2 is that its ideology of the repression of national liberation movements is affirmed and perpetuated. I call this a compounding of the ethical dubiety of the text itself in that the commentators should know better, since they, as scholars, should have no particular unrecognized and undeclared investment in a text they happening to be commenting on (for one thing, they will probably be commenting on a quite different and quite possibly discrepant text next week) and they should be able to relativize their text by situating it within a wider cultural and intellectual context. It is no great crime, perhaps, that the poet of Psalm 2 should do his own thing, make his own statement, utter his own prejudices, be as opinionated and one-sided and passionate as he likes. But it is a shocking thing that scholars of these texts should only be able to comment on how insightful and (in one sense or another) 'true' this text is, without ever embarking on a critical evaluation of it. They compound the moral dubiety of the text by perpetuating its claims and by lending them their own moral authority.

Any commentator worth his or her salt knows how important in Old Testament theology the theme of national freedom is, whether it is in the announcements of the mission of the Deutero-Isaianic servant (e.g. Isa. 61.1), or in the piety of the psalmists (e.g. Ps. 44.2; 69.18) or in the historical narratives (e.g. Exod. 3.8; Judg. 10.11; Neh. 9.28).<sup>79</sup> But they all suppress what

<sup>78</sup>. This condition of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) is classically described in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (trans. Hazel E. Barnes; London: Routledge, 1991 [original edition, 1943]), pp. 47-70. The worst form of bad faith, as Roger Poole notes (in *The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought* [ed. Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombly; New York: Harper & Row, 1988], p. 67) is 'that self-deception which allows a subject to believe that he [sic] is not free to change things, or that things could not be otherwise'; this is the form of bad faith to which commentators are most susceptible.

<sup>79</sup>. Curiously, though, the writers of articles in our standard Bible encyclopaedias do not know this, but almost invariably know only about per-

they know about liberation, deliverance and freedom when it comes to non-Israelite peoples—and so are complicit in the unlovely ethnocentricity of the text. They know that the Hebrew Bible is supposed to favour the poor, the weak, the underprivileged and the oppressed, but they forget that orientation when it is a matter of foreigners. And they know that the language of this psalm echoes the language of the brutal oriental empires, but they ‘manage’ that fact out of their consciousness.

Some are pointing out these days how Psalm 2 functions as part of a preface to the Psalms, setting a tone and an orientation to the Psalter as a whole.<sup>80</sup> They do not notice that this position of the psalm makes the ethical problem it raises only more acute. If it is problematic that the psalm resists national claims to self-determination, and represents the Jerusalem king as a ruler in

sonal freedom or captivity. So for example J. Marsh, ‘Liberty’, in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. George Arthur Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), III, pp. 122-23; F. Stanley Jones, ‘Freedom’, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), II, pp. 855-59 (‘[T]he OT does not develop a theology of freedom on the basis of the Exodus. Rather, Israel was ransomed in order to be God’s servants...and the language used to describe this event is primarily that of “redemption,” not of “freedom”’ [p. 855]—which does not seem at all true to me). Contrast F.F. Bruce, ‘Liberty’, in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* [ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], III, pp. 119-22: ‘The paradigm of liberty in the OT...is the deliverance of the Israelites from their servitude in Egypt’ [p. 119]). Slavery, too, is generally recognized in the textbooks as purely a personal matter. So I. Mendelsohn, ‘Slavery in the OT’, in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, IV, pp. 383-41, and Muhammad A. Dandamayev, ‘Slavery’, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, VI, pp. 58-62, concluding that ‘The institution of slavery was taken for granted not only by the free persons but also by the slaves themselves, who never demanded its abolition’ (p. 61). How would we know? And why should ‘literal’, personal slavery be privileged by dictionary-article authors over the slavery of whole nations?

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Erich Zenger, ‘Der Psalter als Wegweiser und Wegbegleiter: Ps 1-2 als Proömium des Psalmenbuchs’, in *Sie wandern von Kraft zu Kraft: Aufbrüche, Wege, Begegnungen. Festgabe für Bischof Reinhard Lettmann* (ed. Arnold Angenendt and Herbert Vorgrimler; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1993), pp. 29-47 (I am grateful to Erich Zenger for sending me a copy of this article); A. Deissler, ‘Die Stellung von Psalm 2 im Psalter. Folgen für die Auslegung’, in *Beiträge zur Psalmenforschung* (Forschung zur Bibel, 60; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1988), pp. 73-83.

the pattern of oriental tyrants, a serious question is raised about the piety of the Psalter as a whole—namely, whether what is represented in it is a universally valid and desirable type of piety, or whether its theological opinions stand in need of critique from the standpoints of its readers (whatever they may be).<sup>81</sup>

There is also the fact, which must be taken into account at this point, that Psalm 2 is among the most frequently quoted psalms in the New Testament. From an ethical point of view, this fact should not be taken to exculpate the ideology of the psalm but rather should call into question the New Testament itself—a text that draws its authority, in part, from the violence and repressiveness of Psalm 2. It does not matter that the intertexts of Psalm 2 do not take the psalm ‘literally’, for from an ethical point of view it is all one whether the violence is literal or metaphorical. If the reign of the messiah is to be founded on violence and the suppression of what we would today call the legitimate interests of others, that constitutes a problem for Christianity.<sup>82</sup> In short, the quotation of Psalm 2 in the New Testament by no means legitimates the ethics of the psalm, but rather problematizes the New Testament.

#### 4. *A Bible Readers’ Liberation Movement*

So far in this essay, it has been the freedom of ‘Moabites’ and

<sup>81</sup>. And if, as Gosse argues (*‘Le Psaume 2 et l’usage rédactionnel’*), the psalm represents inner conflicts in the postexilic community projected onto the outside world, the ethical problem of the psalm takes on yet another dimension: it is whether it is right to use the language of political suppression to deal with conflicts in the realm of ideas—whether, to put it concretely, you do not have an ethical problem with your beliefs if you find yourself wanting to smash those who disagree with them like a potter’s vessel.

<sup>82</sup>. Here, for example, is the language of violence masquerading as the language of piety: ‘When [Christ] burst the bands of the grave... He purchased for Himself an universal dominion. Henceforth His kingdom has been established in Zion, and all people of the earth will be subdued either to His love or to His wrath. What remains for us but to yield ourselves reverently to His sway...?’ (Peter Young, ‘The Book of Psalms’, in *The Old Testament according to the Authorised Version: Poetical Books* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1878), *in loc.*

their rights to self-determination that have been the subject of discussion. But they are not the only ones to have their interests and rights suppressed by the psalm. There are also the readers.

There is no denying that the psalm has its own kind of dramatic and aesthetic power, and, since it professes to speak about God, and moreover to extol his lordship, it is a rare reader who is not intimidated by this psalm into thinking that it offers rewarding insights into spiritual realities. Whether or not such intimidation goes under the name of 'the authority of the Bible', there can be little doubt that most readers feel no freedom to resist the power and authority of the psalm—and thus, its ideology. It is not only fictional 'Moabites' who have fetters upon them but real people at the end of the twentieth century also who are constrained by the psalm to believe that God has favourites among the peoples of the earth, has no time for the idea of toleration, and resorts to violence to solve his problems.

But there is another kind of power to which Bible readers are subject—at least Bible readers of the kind who read essays like this. It is the power of the academic community, who control what may be said about psalms. The scholars who write commentaries and learned papers on the psalm do not merely give us information about the backgrounds to the text or offer us exegeses for our consideration. They also control—it is not too strong a word—the reading and interpretation of the text.<sup>83</sup> It is

<sup>83</sup>. For this reason, I am at present teaching a course on the Psalms in which I forbid students to read books (other than the Psalms). I mean: I require them in their essays to show no evidence that they have read anything but the text, for I know all too well that if they do, they will believe the books and not the evidence of the text. Needless to say, they find this an oppressive regime, telling me every day that they know no other way of writing essays but to read books. This rebellion only encourages me the more, and I laugh them to scorn, taking a leaf out of the Psalter. One day soon, however, when they are firm and confident in their own ability to read psalms, I shall demand that they turn to the commentaries, and discover for themselves the difference between the texts and the scholarly tradition. They will praise me then (I fondly believe) for enabling their freedom from the tyranny of the tradition. It may be of interest to mention that in our departmental statement of goals for each graduating student in Biblical Studies the first of the goals is 'that he or she can handle the Bible confidently, and is not intimidated by it or the scholarship about it'.

too late in the day for anyone to claim the innocence of texts, whether Bible texts or scholarly commentaries; all have their own interest to serve, and they serve it with their whole being. The commentaries are written precisely to tell us how we should read Psalm 2, and what they say with a single voice is that the psalm is good and true and admirable and uplifting. They have no fault to find with it. Compared with this insistent and united message, often conveyed subliminally and therefore all the more effectively, their dissent from one another over details of exegesis or questions like the date of the psalm are trivial. Indeed, in the very act of evaluating the differences among commentators—which is the substance of most scholarly work—the reader is systematically deflected from considering what it is that they have in common: a complicity with the text.

In such a situation, what is called for, in my opinion, is a readers' liberation movement.<sup>84</sup> Too many readers are in bondage either to the text or to the approved interpretations of the text—or to both. With one bound—as the saying goes—they could be free. Like the freedom fighters of the Moabite Liberation Front, they have nothing to lose but their chains, but unlike them they do not even need to unite to find their freedom—everyone can do it for themselves.

Being free from the authority of the text and of its professional interpreters does not mean denying or rejecting everything they say. It is not obligatory to deny the psalm's claim that it is foolish to resist God or that God wants humanity to be obedient to his will. But it does mean being free to decide for oneself whether one will accept that these are appropriate terms in which to speak of the divine. It is a sad day for theism if the only language its adherents can find to express their sense of the divine is the language of oriental despotism, with its scornful deity who offers comfort to petty kings in their grandiose ambitions and authorizes state violence and a regime of terror against those who want nothing more gross than self-determination.

<sup>84</sup> Terry Eagleton has guyed the idea of readers' liberation in his *Against the Grain: Essays 1975–1985* (London: Verso, 1986). But for all his charisma, Eagleton probably does not know what life is really like out here in the wastelands where the Bible is still being read as if it were gospel truth.

Have I been *fair* to this text?, I wonder finally, re-reading this essay. What have these few scratchings of ink on leather (or whatever) that we call Psalm 2—a mere 365 letters in all, occupying no more than four or five lines of printed footnote text<sup>85</sup>—done to deserve this disproportionate scrutiny, this excessive interrogation by an alien and apparently hostile critic? And have I not, with my dreadful hermeneutic of suspicion, offended against what Wayne Booth calls the ‘golden rule’ of reading, ‘Read as you would have others read you’? I console myself with reflection on the disparity between us, between the text and me. If we were partners, on more or less the same footing, I would do as I would be done by. But this text has a power so incommensurable with mine that my voice is no more than a whimper. The text is a ocean liner (the S.S. Authority) bearing down on me out of the fog, me in my leaky dinghy trying to navigate the chartless sea of meaning. This text has been chanted by millions of the faithful over two millennia, subliminally supporting, *inter alia*, papal authority, the divine right of kings and the British empire too—and its force will not abate even if the institutions it supports may change from time to time; my hope of (this-worldly) immortality, on the other hand, is nothing more than an entry in the ATLA database. Do I need to be *fair*?

<sup>85</sup>. Here is the *whole* of the text of Psalm 2 (printed, for authenticity’s sake, without the usual typographical and reading conventions like space between words, verse numbers, poetic lines, and Masoretic vocalization):

ל מוֹדַד גִּשְׁמוֹ וְיָמוּל אֲמוֹתָיִם הַגּוֹרִי קִצְתֵי עַבְוֹתַי כִּי אֲרַצְרוּחַ וְיִמְנוּסְדוּעֵל יִהְיֶה הוֹעֵל מִשְׁחֹנֹתַי וְנִקְהָאֲתָמוֹסְרוֹתֵי מוֹנֵשֶׁל מִהַמְנֹנֵעַ  
 מִתִּימוֹ וְיִשְׁבֵּב עַמִּי מִשְׁחָקֵי דְוִילֵעַל מִהַגְּדִיבְרֵאֵלִי מִבּוֹבֵאֵפֶוֹ חֲרוֹנוֹ וְיִבְהַלְמוּ וְאֲנִי מִסְתִּימָלִי כִּי עֵלֵי יוֹדֵד קִדְשֵׁי אֲסַפְרָה  
 אֶלְחָקִי הוֹהֵאֲמֵר אֵלֵי בְנֵי אֲתָהֵאֲנִי הַיּוֹמִלֵד תִּכְשָׁאֵל מִנִּי וְאֲתָהֵגִימִנְחֵלֵכָה חֲחֹתֵכָה אֲפִסִּי אֲרַע הַרְעִמְבִּשְׁטֵרֵל כִּכְלִי  
 עֲרַתְפַּעְמוֹ שְׁתִּמְלִיכֵי מִרְשָׁבֵי לִוְהוֹסְרוֹ שְׁפִטֵי אֲרַע עַבְדֵי הַתִּי הוֹהֵבִיר אֲהֻגִילֵוֹ מִרְעֵדֵהֵשְׁקוֹבֵר פִּנְתֵי אֲפֹתֵי אֲבִדֵדֵרֵכְבִּי  
 מִעֲרַבְמִטְטֵאֲבֹאֵשֵׁרִיב לְחֹסֵיבִי