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S.D.G.

“I am also still reading the Psalms daily as I have done for years. There is no other book that I know and love as much.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a personal letter to his parents, Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer, dated May 15, 1943 (*DBWE* 8:81; *DBW* 8:72).

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PREFACE

The narrowing of a dissertation topic is one of the most important, and challenging, tasks for a PhD student. It often involves hours of research and conversation, along with painstaking work with pen and paper, to clarify and concisely verbalize the thesis statement so that it properly defines and confines the scope of the project. This description aptly depicts my experience in the process of writing this dissertation. My search for a topic started with a conversation with my *Doktorvater* at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Dr. Timothy Saleska, who passed on to me two books: Jason Byassee's *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* and Brian Brock's *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture*. Brock's book, especially, intrigued me with its "study in Christian moral theology" by means of "an analysis of the practices of the Christian exegetical tradition,"¹ particularly focused on the exegesis of the Psalms. Before moving on to his main interpretive exemplars, Augustine and Luther, Brock presents five twentieth century models—the fifth of them being Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I had not previously considered Bonhoeffer to be someone I'd turn to for interpretive insight on the Psalms. In fact, I was not aware of much of his writing on the Psalms outside of a brief acquaintance with his *Prayerbook of the Bible*. Brock's depiction of Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the actual text of the Psalms, and on the importance of meditating on the Psalms—along with the concern Bonhoeffer had for reading the Psalms Christologically—trigued me and prompted me to dig further into Bonhoeffer's use and interpretation of the Psalter. I soon discovered evidence in Bonhoeffer's works, and in many of the secondary sources on him, of a profound interaction with the Psalms, finding expression intently during the time of

¹ Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), xiv.

his leadership in the Confessing Church's Preacher's Seminary in Finkenwalde (1935–1940). Finding no indication of there being any sustained scholarly treatment of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms, I pressed on in my research until I was able, with the invaluable assistance of my dissertation readers, to narrow down my *question* to what appears in this dissertation. As I worked through the various stages and chapters of this project I became more and more convinced that Bonhoeffer's particular approach toward the Psalms injects something new into the history of Psalms interpretation, and for that reason needed to be explored and examined. It is to that end that this dissertation is aimed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If there is one lesson I have had reiterated to me through the process of this dissertation, it is that no man is an island in any substantive and worthy venture on which he embarks. God has graciously designed Christian community and given us to live in this gloriously dynamic existence for our own benefit, and for the benefit of his mission. My journey has been forever impacted by the many family members, friends, and colleagues who have invested in me and supported me in my education and vocation. I want to first recognize my parents, Rev. Jerome C. and Elsie Pribbenow (1932–2002), who brought me to the Lord in Holy Baptism and raised me in the Christian faith. They, along with all my siblings (Paul, Mark, Dawn, Dean, and (my twin) Beth), have cheered me on and supported me with undying love. Pastors and campus ministry colleagues—including Rev. John Wile, Rev. Rick Bridston, Rev. Rodney Venberg, Jay Anderson, Garwood Anderson, Tim Peterson, Dick Ryan, among many others—have also played a crucial role in my theological formation and my sense of calling to this task of biblical studies.

Dr. David Veum—who was the first to pose the question to me, “have you ever thought about going on to get your PhD?”—has given me timely encouragement and feedback on my work, and has consistently reminded me of the benefit of my studies for the church. In addition, he has tirelessly advocated for the financial support of my education at Lutheran Brethren Seminary (LBS) and at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (CSL), without which assistance I could not have even considered these programs. Dr. Eugene Boe, in addition to all his other administrative, teaching, and churchly duties, has served as one of my most constant mentors and helpers. Our numerous discussions (brief and in-depth) on the topic of Bonhoeffer and his interpretation of the Psalms has clarified and shaped this dissertation immensely. Additionally, LBS teachers and colleagues—including Rev. John Kilde, Rev. Brad Soenksen, Dr. Gaylan

Mathiesen, Dr. Mark Erickson, Rev. Nate Oldenkamp, Dr. Allan Bjerkaas, and Brent Andrews—not to mention my LBS students, have all contributed valuable instruction, as well as timely assistance, encouragement, feedback, and support. Much thanks is to be given to my fellow students at CSL, especially Jean-Baptiste Mberebe and Brent Olson, along with the many CSL professors under whom I studied, including Drs. Reed Lessing, David Adams, Jeffrey Gibbs, David Maxwell, Jeffrey Oswald, Paul Raabe, David Rosin, Bruce Schuchard, James Voelz, Craig Evans (adjunct), and Richard Schultz (adjunct). Drs. Timothy Saleska, Erik Herrmann, and Mark Seifrid have served me tirelessly and faithfully as readers, mentors, editors, and coaches throughout the process of writing this dissertation. It goes without saying that their investment in this work has been profound. I am humbled by their support, encouragement, feedback, and generous contributions.

The final acknowledgment is reserved for my loving wife, Melissa, and our kids, Emily, Elias, Elliot, and Elise. They have followed me—from Wisconsin, to Minnesota, to Missouri, and back again to Minnesota—and cheered me on, listening to my ruminations and external processing for months-on-end. I am happy to say now, kids, that Daddy’s “big paper” is finally finished. Melissa, your faithful prayers, timely wisdom, and enduring patience have provided me daily motivation to give thanks and praise to God, who saw fit to knit our hearts and lives together as a couple and as a family. I love you all dearly.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>CRJ</i>	<i>Christian Research Journal</i>
<i>CH</i>	<i>Church History</i>
<i>Colloq</i>	<i>Colloquium</i>
<i>CICR</i>	<i>Communio: International Catholic Review</i>
<i>CJ</i>	<i>Concordia Journal</i>
<i>CPR</i>	<i>Concordia Pulpit Resources</i>
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Concordia Theological Journal</i>
<i>CurTM</i>	<i>Currents in Theology and Mission</i>
<i>DBW</i>	<i>Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke</i> . Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1986–99.
<i>DBWE</i>	<i>Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works</i> . Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., Victoria J. Barnett, Barbara Wojhoski, general editors. 17 vols. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996–2014.
<i>DBWE 1</i>	<i>Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church</i> . Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.
<i>DBWE 2</i>	<i>Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology</i> . Edited by Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. Translated by H. Martin Rumscheidt. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.
<i>DBWE 3</i>	<i>Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3</i> . Edited by John W. de Gruchy. Translated by Douglas Stephen Bax. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.
<i>DBWE 4</i>	<i>Discipleship</i> . Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey. Translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001.
<i>DBWE 5</i>	<i>Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible</i> . Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly. Translated by Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.

- DBWE 6 Ethics.* Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Charles C. West. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.
- DBWE 7 Fiction from Tegel Prison.* Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.
- DBWE 8 Letters and Papers from Prison.* Edited by John W. de Gruchy. Translated by Lisa E. Dahill, Isabel Best, Reinhard Krauss, Nancy Lukens, Barbra Rumscheidt, and Martin Rumscheidt, with Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010.
- DBWE 9 The Young Bonhoeffer 1918–1927.* Edited by Paul Duane Matheny, Clifford J. Green, and Marshall D. Johnson. Translated by Marcy C. Nebelsick, with assistance of Douglass W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002.
- DBWE 10 Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928–1931.* Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Douglass W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.
- DBWE 11 Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932.* Edited by Victoria J. Barnett, Mark S. Brocker, and Michael B. Lukens. Translated by Anne Schmidt-Lange, with Isabel Best, Nicholas Humphrey, and Marion Pauck. Supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.
- DBWE 12 Berlin: 1932–1933.* Edited by Larry L. Rasmussen. Translated by Isabel Best and David Higgins. Supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- DBWE 13 London, 1933–1935.* Edited by Keith Clements. Translated by Isabel Best. Supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013.
- DBWE 14 Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937.* Edited by H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brocker. Translated by Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013.
- DBWE 15 Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940.* Edited by Victoria J. Barnett. Translated by Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick, and Scott A. Moore. Supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011.
- DBWE 16 Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940–1945.* Edited by Mark S. Brocker. Translated by Lisa E. Dahill. Supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.
- DBWE 17 Indexes and Supplementary Material.* Edited by Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski with the assistance of Mark S. Brocker. With a

retrospect on the English Edition by Clifford J. Green. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014.

<i>ExAud</i>	<i>Ex auditu</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelisches Theologie</i>
<i>FFMag</i>	<i>Faith and Fellowship Magazine</i>
<i>FH</i>	<i>Fides et Historia FC Formula of Concord</i>
<i>GTJ</i>	<i>Grace Theological Journal</i>
<i>GOTR</i>	<i>Greek Orthodox Theological Review</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
<i>JTSA</i>	<i>Journal of Theology for Southern Africa</i>
<i>LT</i>	<i>Literature and Theology</i>
<i>Log</i>	<i>Logia</i>
<i>LQ</i>	<i>Lutheran Quarterly</i>
<i>LTJ</i>	<i>Lutheran Theological Journal</i>
<i>MedExeg</i>	<i>Medieval Exegesis</i>
<i>TMR</i>	<i>The Methodist Review</i>
<i>MTh</i>	<i>Modern Theology</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>NIVAC</i>	<i>The NIV Application Commentary</i>
<i>PSB</i>	<i>The Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>
<i>PAH</i>	<i>Probleme alttestamentlicher Hermeneutik</i>
<i>LXX</i>	<i>Septuagint Translation</i>

<i>SCS</i>	<i>Sino-Christian Studies</i>
<i>Spec</i>	<i>Speculum</i>
<i>SCE</i>	<i>Studies in Christian Ethics</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>ThR</i>	<i>Theological Review</i>
<i>ThSt</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>TBl</i>	<i>Theologische Blätter</i>
<i>ThTo</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>USQR</i>	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>WLQ</i>	<i>Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly</i>
<i>ZTK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>
<i>ZZ</i>	<i>Zwischen den Zeiten</i>

CHRONOLOGY¹

1906	
Jan 4	Dietrich and Sabine Bonhoeffer are born to Karl Bonhoeffer and Paula von Hase Bonhoeffer in Breslau
1912	
Spr	Bonhoeffer family moves to Berlin where Dr. Bonhoeffer begins work as the directory of the university psychiatric clinic
1913	
Easter	Dietrich begins school in the Friedrich Werder Gymnasium
1916	
July 28	Bonhoeffer family moves to Berlin-Grunewald, Wangenheimstrasse 14
1918	
Apr 28	Walter Bonhoeffer, Dietrich's oldest brother, dies in World War I
Nov 11	World War I ends
1919	
Easter	Dietrich enters Grunewald Gymnasium
1921	
Mar	Confirmation of Dietrich and Sabine Bonhoeffer at Grunewald Church, Berlin
1923	
Summer	Dietrich begins theological studies at Tübingen University
1924	
Apr-June	Dietrich and his brother Klaus travel to Rome, Sicily, and North Africa
June-July	Dietrich begins his studies in Berlin
1925	
Summer	Dietrich is introduced to Karl Barth's theology
1927	
July	Dietrich submits his doctoral dissertation <i>Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church</i> (DBWE/DBW 1)

¹ This chronology of Bonhoeffer's life is based on the chronology from *DBWE* 17:63–120.

Dec	Dietrich takes his doctoral examinations and defends his doctoral thesis
1928	
Feb	Dietrich appointed as assistant pastor at German church in Barcelona, Spain
June 27	Dietrich begins work on his postdoctoral dissertation, <i>Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology (DBWE/DBW 2)</i>
Summer	Dietrich lectures in systematic theology at Berlin University; lecture series: "Crisis and Hope in the Contemporary Religious Situation"
1929	
Feb 3	Dietrich delivers final sermon at German church in Barcelona, Spain
Feb 27	Dietrich returns to Berlin
Summer	Dietrich begins role as academic assistant in systematic theology under Wilhelm Lütgert in Berlin
1930	
July 18	<i>Act and Being</i> accepted as entrance dissertation for professional post
July 31	Dietrich present public inaugural lecture: "The Anthropological Question in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology"
Sept 5	Dietrich leaves for New York to study as a Sloan Fellow at Union Theological Seminary
1931	
June	Dietrich completes his year of study at Union Theological Seminary and returns to Berlin
July	Dietrich meets Karl Barth for the first time and has multiple face-to-face appointments with him in Bonn
Aug 1	Dietrich appointed as lecturer in theology at Berlin University
Sept	Dietrich elected as youth secretary for the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches
Oct 1	Dietrich begins serves as student chaplain at the Technical College in Berlin-Charlottenburg
Nov 15	Dietrich ordained at St. Matthias Church, Berlin
Nov	Dietrich begins teaching confirmation classes at Zion Church, Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin

1932

- Summer Dietrich teaches lecture course at Berlin University, “The Nature of the Church,” and the seminar, “Is There a Christian Ethic?”
- Winter Dietrich teaches lecture course, “Creation and Sin,” published in 1933 as *Creation and Fall (DBWE/DBW 3)*

1933

- Jan 30 Adolf Hitler made chancellor of German
- Feb 1 Dietrich’s radio broadcast “The Younger Generation’s altered View of the Concept of Führer” is cut off the air
- Mar-Apr Dietrich develops theses concerning the question of the church membership of “non-Aryan” Christians
- Summer Dietrich lectures at Berlin University on Christology
- Aug Dietrich participates in meetings involved in the writing of the Bethel Confession. Meetings result in the “August version” of the Bethel Confession
- Oct 17 Dietrich begins pastorate at the German Evangelical Church, Sydenham, and the Reformed Church of St. Paul in London
- Nov 19 First suspensions of pastors in Germany
- Nov 21 Dietrich makes first visit to Bishop George Bell in Chichester

1934

- May 29–31 Confession synod in Barmen takes place, culminating in the Barmen Theological Declaration. Confessing Church is organized
- Dec Dietrich makes visit to British Anglican monasteries
- Dec 22 Karl Barth loses teaching position in Bonn

1935

- Mar 10 Dietrich delivers final sermon in London
- Mar Dietrich visits Anglican monasteries Society of John the Evangelist, Oxford; Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield; and Society of the Sacred Mission, Kelham; and the Woodbrooke Quaker Center, Selly Oak, Birmingham.
- Apr 15 Dietrich meets with Bishop Bell in London before returning to Germany
- Apr 26 Berlin-Brandenburg Preachers’ Seminary of the Confessing Church of the Old Prussian Union is established under Dietrich’s directorship. First

- session begins at ZingsthoF
- June 24 Preachers' seminary moves to Finkenwalde
- July 30 Retreat held with Griefswald theology students in Finkenwalde until August 2. On July 31, Dietrich delivers lecture "Christus in den Psalmen" (*DBWE* 14:387–93; *DBW* 14:369–77)
- Aug Bonhoeffer published essay, "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement"
- Oct Bonhoeffer family moves to Charlottenberg, Berlin
- Oct 8–11 Dietrich delivers Bible study on "King David" (*DBWE* 14:870–93; *DBW* 14:878–904)
- Dec 1 Heinrich Himmler makes decree that declares all examinations for the Confessing Church invalid, all Confessing Church training centers invalid, and the offenders liable to punishment
- 1936**
- Apr 22 Dietrich composes a "Guide to Daily Meditation" on Scripture (*DBWE* 14:931–36; *DBW* 14:945–50)
- Aug 5 Dietrich's authorization to teach at Berlin University is withdrawn
- 1937**
- Sept 28 Gestapo closes the Finkenwalde preachers' seminary
- Nov Publication of *The Cost of Discipleship* (*DBWE/DBW* 4)
- Nov 27 Twenty-seven pastors, former Finkenwalde students arrested
- Dec 5 Dietrich's underground collective pastorates begin in Köslin and Groß-Schlönwitz; Bonhoeffer's official residence is now in Schlawe, as an "assistant pastor" under Superintendent Eduard Block
- 1938**
- Jan 11 Dietrich banned from Berlin and Brandenburg
- Sept-Oct Dietrich writes *Life Together* (*DBWE* 5:3–140; *DBW* 5:15–172)
- Nov 9-11 *Kristallnacht*. Destruction of six hundred synagogues in Germany, looting of 7,500 Jewish-owned shops, arrest of 35,000 Jews
- 1939**
- May 22 Dietrich receives orders to report for duty in the armed forces

- June 2 Dietrich leaves for United States via London, where he planned to continue his studies at Union Theological Seminary
- July 7–8 Dietrich decides to leave New York via London, arriving in Berlin on July 30
- Sept 9 Dietrich applies for military chaplaincy in order to avoid military combat. His application was denied on February 27, 1940
- 1940**
- Winter Writes “Meditation on Psalm 119” (fragment; v. 1–21; *DBWE* 15:496–526; *DBW* 15:499–535)
- Winter Publishes *Prayerbook of the Bible* (*DBWE* 5:155–81; *DBW* 5:107–75)
- Aug 22 Reich Central Security Office issues a ban on public speaking against Bonhoeffer and others on the grounds of subversive activity
- Sept Dietrich begins writing *Ethics* (*DBWE/DBW* 6) at Klein-Krössin
- Nov Dietrich assigned to *Abwehr* staff in Munich
- 1941**
- May 6 Leaders of Berlin Confessing Church theological examination commission arrested and imprisoned
- Aug Dietrich visits Karl Barth in Switzerland for the second time
- Oct First deportations of Jews from Berlin take place. First gas chambers installed at Auschwitz, Poland
- Dec 7 Japan attacks Pearl Harbor
- 1942**
- May 25 Dietrich has third visit with Barth in Switzerland
- 1943**
- Jan 13 Dietrich engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer
- Apr 5 Dietrich arrested by military authorities with cooperation of Gestapo and taken to the Tegel Military Detention Center.
- Apr 14 Dietrich writes first letter to parents Karl and Paula from prison
- July Dietrich intensely interrogated at Tegel
- July 23 Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel orders that charges of high treason be dropped in the case against Hans von Dohnanyi and Dietrich

- Nov Dietrich writes first letter to Eberhard Bethge
- Nov 23 Dietrich composes “Prayers for Prisoners” (*DBWE* 8:194–98; *DBW* 8:204–8)
- 1944**
- Apr 30 Dietrich writes first theological letter to Bethge (*DBWE* 8:361–67; *DBW* 8:401–7) in which he mentions the concept of “religionless Christianity”
- May 5 Dietrich writes second theological letter to Bethge (*DBWE* 8:371–74; *DBW* 8:413–16)
- May 29 Dietrich writes his third theological letter (*DBWE* 8:404–7; *DBW* 8:453–56) and has it smuggled out of Tegel
- June 8 Dietrich writes his fourth theological letter (*DBWE* 8:424–32; *DBW* 8:474–80)
- June 30 Dietrich writes a fifth theological letter (*DBWE* 8:448–52; *DBW* 8:501–5)
- July 8 Dietrich writes a sixth theological letter (*DBWE* 8:454–58; *DBW* 8:508–13)
- July 16-18 Dietrich writes a seventh theological letter (*DBWE* 8:473–82; *DBW* 8:526–38)
- July 20 Failed assassination attempt on Hitler
- Aug 23 Dietrich writes last (preserved) letter to Bethge
- Sept 22 Gestapo discovers incriminating *Abwehr* files at Zossen
- Oct 8 Dietrich moved from Tegel to the Gestapo prison at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, Berlin
- Dec 19 Dietrich writes last letter to Maria von Wedemeyer
- 1945**
- Jan 17 Dietrich writes his final letter, to his parents
- Feb 7 Dietrich transferred to the Buchenwald concentration camp
- Apr 3 Dietrich transferred from Buchenwald to Regensburg
- Apr 6 Dietrich transferred from Regensburg to Schönberg
- Apr 8 Dietrich transferred to Flossenbürg concentration camp during the night and court-martialed

- Apr 9 Dietrich executed at Flossenbürg together with other key figures of the resistance
- Apr 30 Adolf Hitler commits suicide in the bunker of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin
- May 2 German troops surrender in Berlin
- May 30 From Geneva, Adolf Freudenberg telegraphs news of Bonhoeffer's death to London. Maria von Wedemeyer learns of it in June, Bonhoeffer's parents in Berlin only at the end of June through a visit by Hans-Bernd Gisevius and from the BBC broadcast of the London memorial service

ABSTRACT

Pribbenow, Brad A. "Prayerbook of Christ, Prayerbook of the Church: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological Interpretation of the Psalms." Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2017. 260pp.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), German Lutheran theologian and pastor, is known as an ethicist, church reformer, political resistor, seminary professor, and martyr. Yet overlooked by many scholars is his contribution to the history of interpretation of the Psalms. Bonhoeffer's interpretive approach toward the Psalms, which shares many characteristics of pre-critical exegesis, is built on a two-pronged hermeneutic emphasizing the relationship of the Psalms to prayer and to Jesus Christ the Crucified One. The distinguishing mark of his unique contribution to the history of interpretation is his emphasis on Jesus Christ, who prayed the Psalms in his incarnation. This historical and existential reality functions as the filter through which Bonhoeffer interprets the Psalms for himself and for the church. Bonhoeffer's writings on the Psalter, including his use of the Psalms at Finkenwalde and into the last two years of his life in Nazi prison, demonstrate various applications of this approach. An analysis of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms in the latter years of his life explores the ways in which he developed and changed his approach. This dissertation concludes with an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Bonhoeffer's interpretive approach, as well as suggestions for how this research might aid the church in its use of the Psalms and contribute to other scholarly pursuits in the field of biblical studies.

INTRODUCTION

To say that the Psalms have played a prominent and influential role in the life, liturgy, and doctrine of the church is to utter perhaps the one phrase with which every Psalms scholar agrees.¹ Encouraged as the first book of study for new believers, memorized by lay persons and professionals alike,² chanted and sung within the liturgy of the church, and prayed in moments from utter despair to utter joy—the Psalms have received equal attention throughout the church’s two-thousand-year history from both lay audiences and academic scholars. Based on the later writings of German Lutheran theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (AD 1906–1945)—especially those writings from the era of his leadership at the Confessing Church’s underground seminary in Finkenwalde, Germany (1935–1937)—we are given yet another example of the ways in which the Psalms functioned to shape both the personal and corporate spirituality of the church-community. As Geoffrey B. Kelly observes, for Bonhoeffer, the Psalms, “whether sung or read in the Christian community, constitute . . . the privileged center of the church’s spiritual life and a means of regenerating a community’s flagging spirits.”³

¹ Recent publications which front this maxim in their writings include *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, VIII: Psalms 51–150, ed. Quentin Wesselschmidt (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), xvii; David Firth and Philip S. Johnston, eds., *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 77.

² Brian E. Daley, “Finding the Right Key: The Aims and Strategies of Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms” in *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms*, ed. Brian E. Daley and Paul R. Kolbet (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 12; William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 165, 178; Dome Jean Leclercq, “The Exposition and Exegesis of Scripture, from Gregory the Great to St. Bernard,” in *Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. G. W. H. Lampe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 196; Gordon Wenham, *Psalms As Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 41–56.

³ Geoffrey B. Kelly, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition” to Bonhoeffer’s *Prayerbook* (DBWE 5), 145.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man known by many today as an ethicist, church reformer, political resistor, church leader, seminary professor, social critic, and martyr, also reflected deeply on the message and the place of the Psalms in the life of Jesus Christ and, subsequently, in the life the church. His reflections, guided by his developing theological and hermeneutical convictions, led him to a unique understanding of the Psalms as the prayerbook of Christ. His exegesis was Christological, but not as primarily determined by the Psalter's prophetic, typological, or super-historical nature. Rather, his Christological exegesis was rooted in the historical reality of the incarnation and his conviction that Jesus Christ, in his humanity, prayed the Psalms as one who was both their divine source and their interpretive key. The Psalms were understood by Bonhoeffer, then, as the prayerbook of the church in a way uniquely informed by his belief that they were first and foremost the prayerbook of Jesus Christ in his incarnation.

The Thesis

In this dissertation, I intend to describe the development and characteristics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's hermeneutical approach to the Psalms in a way that previous scholars have not attempted. Through this analysis I will show how Bonhoeffer makes use of previous exegetical approaches to reach an understanding of Christological exegesis which, in certain key aspects, is new in the history of Psalms interpretation.

The Current Status of the Question

The Burgeoning Field of Bonhoeffer Scholarship

Bonhoeffer was not formally trained as an exegete but he, nonetheless, studied, preached on and incorporated the Psalms into his daily life and his theology to a profound degree.⁴ He

⁴ As Patrick D. Miller, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Psalms," *PSB* (1994), 274, reminds us, "[t]he dialogue between scripture and theology, between biblical interpreters and systematic and historical theologians, is a fairly

brought to the Psalms a love for the church, and this led him to interpret the Psalms in a way which could nourish the church—a way which was both theological and, arguably, uniquely Christological. What is Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the Psalms? How does he formulate his exegetical position? Is there a consistent clarification of the approach he advocates? How does he come to his particular Christological interpretation of the Psalms? What are his influences? How and why does he differ from these influences? To what degree is his hermeneutic of the Psalms precritical? To what degree is it informed and aided by modern exegetical methods? Does he maintain this perspective throughout his later years? These and other similar questions deserve a considered response.

A survey of current scholarship on Dietrich Bonhoeffer reveals a piqued interest in his life and theology over the past few decades. Much of this interest has followed the publication of two major collections of his works. The first of these is *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke (DBW)*, which marked Bonhoeffer’s eightieth birthday and was issued between 1986 and 1998.⁵ This was followed by the English translation of Bonhoeffer’s writings, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works (DBWE)*, which was initiated in 1993 and completed with its final volume in 2014.⁶ Both of these collections are critical editions, however the English edition represents a new translation that includes a number of writings discovered after the printing of the earlier *DBW*. Together these two collections serve as the preeminent sources for the primary documents of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The attention given Bonhoeffer during and since the publication of these two collections

quiet, if not mute, one in our time. But that was not the case for Bonhoeffer. . . . He lived and thought out of the deep well of scripture.”

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, 17 vols., ed. Eberhard Bethge, et al. (Gütersloh: Chr Kaiser, 1986–1999).

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, 17 vols., ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993–2014).

has resulted in a panoply of scholarly and popular works.⁷ Conservative scholars have taken interest in Bonhoeffer's theological and Christocentric treatment of Scripture, while liberal scholars have often resonated with his ethics and his clarion call to the church for social action in the face of oppressive forces and systems. The myriad of topics addressed in recent decades includes Bonhoeffer's ethics,⁸ his martyrdom,⁹ his opposition to Hitler,¹⁰ and his view of religion and social justice,¹¹ Jewish-Christian relations,¹² community,¹³ and the nature of the Church.¹⁴ Still others have attempted to analyze his theology,¹⁵ Christology,¹⁶ spirituality,¹⁷ pedagogy,¹⁸

⁷ Stephen R. Haynes explores the evidence of this heightened interest in Bonhoeffer in his 2004 book, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), presenting and assessing the various interpretations of Bonhoeffer and his writings.

⁸ Ronald C. Arnett, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Courage vs. Authority" in *Ethical Communication: Moral Stances in Human Dialogue*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and John Calhoun Merrill (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 109–14; Brock, *Singing*.

⁹ Craig J. Slane. *Bonhoeffer as Martyr: Social Responsibility and Modern Christian Commitment* (Ada, MI: Brazos, 2004); Andrew Chandler and Anthony Harvey, eds., *The Terrible Alternative: Christian Martyrdom in the Twentieth Century* (London: Cassell Academic, 1998).

¹⁰ Sifton, Elisabeth and Fritz Stern, *No Ordinary Men: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi, Resisters Against Hitler in Church and State* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2013).

¹¹ Josiah Ulysses Young, *No Difference in the Fare: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Problem of Racism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Jürgen Moltmann, *Herrschaft Christi und soziale Wirklichkeit nach D. Bonhoeffer* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1959).

¹² Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Bonhoeffer and the Jews: Implications for Jewish-Christian Reconciliation" in *Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg (Chicago: Covenant, 1999), 133–66; Eberhard Bethge, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews" in *Ethical Responsibility: Bonhoeffer's Legacy to the Churches*, ed. John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly (New York and Toronto: Mellen, 1981), 43–96.

¹³ Thomas I. Day, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Christian Community and Common Sense* (New York and Toronto: Mellen, 1982).

¹⁴ H. Gaylon Barker, "Bonhoeffer and the Church Struggle," *CJ* 35 (2009): 363–79.

¹⁵ John W. de Gruchy, Stephen Plant, and Christiane Tietz, eds., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theologie heute; Ein Weg zwischen Fundamentalismus und Säkularismus?* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009).

¹⁶ Edwin H. Robertson, "Bonhoeffer's Christology," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. John Bowen (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 9–24; Ernst Feil, *Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffer's. Hermeneutik – Christologie – Weltverständnis* (Münster: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006); H. Gaylon Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

¹⁷ John W. Matthews, *Anxious Souls Will Ask: The Christ-Centered Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Mary L. Vanden Berg, "Bonhoeffer's Discipleship: Theology for the Purpose of Christian Formation," *CTJ* 44, no. 2 (2009): 333–49; Lisa E. Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009).

anthropology,¹⁹ and hermeneutics.²⁰ Yet, despite the ever-increasing body of literature being written on Dietrich Bonhoeffer in recent years, there still remains a significant gap in the scholarly treatment of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms, including little to no work demonstrating a concentrated and thorough analysis of the development, coherence, and significance of Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms within his intellectual context. I attribute this gap to two main reasons.

Potential Reasons for Neglect of Bonhoeffer's Interpretation of the Psalms

First, despite the fact that many of Bonhoeffer's writings (especially those written after his 1932–1933 lectures on Genesis 1-3, *Schöpfung und Fall*)²¹ have an exegetical flavor to them, Bonhoeffer himself was not, strictly speaking, an exegete. His training and education at Berlin University was in systematics. There is no record of him taking courses on the Psalms at either Tübingen or Berlin, and very few would label him an expert on the Psalms. Bonhoeffer preached sparingly on the Psalms during his academic education and early pastoral work. It wasn't until 1935, upon his spring visit to the Anglican monasteries and then subsequent arrival at the Confessing Church's Preacher Seminary in Finkenwalde, that he began to engage in deeper study of the Psalms.

A second factor for the void of scholarly production on this topic is the relatively modest

¹⁸ Paul R. House, *Bonhoeffer's Seminary Vision: A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

¹⁹ Peter Frick, "Nietzsche's Übermensch and Bonhoeffer's mündiger Mensch: Are They of Any Use for a Contemporary Christian Anthropology?" *SCS*, no. 7 (June 2009): 9–42; Michael Northcott, "Who Am I?: Human Identity and the Spiritual Disciplines in the Witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" in *Who Am I?: Bonhoeffer's Theology Through His Poetry*, ed. Bernd Wannewetsch (London: T&T Clark, 2009); Ronald Gregor Smith, *The Free Man: Studies in Christian Anthropology* (London: Collins, 1969).

²⁰ Martin Kuske, *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ: An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer's Interpretation*, trans. S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

²¹ *DBWE* 3; *DBW* 3.

body of literature which Bonhoeffer has produced on the Psalms. Out of the sixteen volumes of his collected works, only one volume (*DBWE/DBW 5*) contains sustained interaction with the Psalms—and of that, only half (*Prayerbook*) is given to an actual interpretation of the Psalter. The bulk of his exegetical and interpretive work in the Psalms is spread throughout his collection in various lectures, sermons, and letters. This fact leaves Bonhoeffer scholars wanting for a thoroughgoing exposition of the Psalms from him in which he clearly interacts with all parts of the Psalter as well as with other Psalms scholars of his time, and then proposes and defends his own distinct hermeneutic.

Despite these apparent deficiencies, it is my contention that what Bonhoeffer has contributed to Psalms scholarship is, in fact, sufficient enough in quantity and quality to warrant of study of this nature. Furthermore, it is my argument that this literature provides convincing evidence that Bonhoeffer's approach to and treatment of the Psalms yields an interpretation that has, in certain key aspects, not been seen before in the history of Psalms interpretation. For these reasons, which have been starkly overlooked by Bonhoeffer scholars, I intend with this dissertation to write the only full length monograph that provides a concentrated and sustained analysis of the development, coherence, and significance of Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms within his intellectual context.

Overview of the Dissertation

In order to make a fair and informed assessment of the contribution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the history of exegesis of the Psalms, it is necessary to first situate him within that history.²²

²² It is not the intention of this dissertation to, by means of this historical overview, explicitly and unequivocally prove the unique nature of Bonhoeffer's exegetical method. Rather, this overview has value in that it shows the evolution and shape of Christological interpretation of the Psalms, and how Bonhoeffer came to embrace an approach that, while sharing certain presuppositions and methods of earlier approaches, is not clearly found in the tradition.

To account for this, I will begin in chapter one with a survey of the assumptions, basis, and practice of Christological exegesis of the Psalms through the first two thousand years of the church's history. This survey will be organized according to two broad spans of time. First, I will present an overview of premodern Psalms exegesis, a time period which I define as extending from the first century AD into the mid-sixteenth century. I will focus in this section specifically on the various factors and assumptions that contributed to the premodern development of exegetical methods which yielded an interpretation of the Psalms considered faithful to their Christological witness. My theory in this section is that, during the premodern era, a Christological perspective of the Psalms was broadly assumed and unproblematic for orthodox exegetes. What I will demonstrate is how various early church, patristic, and medieval exegetes put this assumption to practice in ways which they believed were faithful to the text and pertinent to their own theological and intellectual context.

Next, I will explore how the "broadly assumed" Christological perspective of the premodern era became problematized in modern or post-Enlightenment biblical studies. I will describe how this change was affected by the influential growth of the discipline of scientific study, and how this, in turn, prompted scholars to ask new questions about the Psalms, questions rarely entertained in previous centuries. My argument in this section is that the influence of intellectual developments, scientific methods of study, and the shift of the *loci* of biblical study from the church to the university led modern era exegetes to marginalize and, at times, renounce the viability of a fundamentally Christological interpretation of the Psalter. I will demonstrate this shift from the writings of major scholars of this era and show how the focus of the exegete was reoriented from *Christ in the text* of the Psalms to the *world behind the text* of the Psalms.

In chapter two, I will narrow the historical time frame to the early twentieth century and

explore the basic attitudes toward the Old Testament prevalent in this more immediate context for Bonhoeffer. I will identify Bonhoeffer's exegetical and theological influences, including those twentieth century biblical scholars who, with Bonhoeffer, reacted against the modern historical-critical assumptions and methods of interpreting the Psalms and who sought to return to an exegesis of the Psalms which was fundamentally Christ-focused. I will discuss Bonhoeffer's early Psalms interpretation and present evidence of his "turning" toward a more precritical and theological interpretation of Scripture—one which he intended to be of greater service to the faith of the Christian Church.

The third chapter will present Bonhoeffer's major exegetical works on the Psalms, including his July 1935 lecture, "Christus in den Psalmen," his July 1937 sermon on Ps 58, his September 1937 publication, *Life Together*, and his 1940 publication, *Prayerbook of the Bible*. Through an analysis of these works, I will deduce the essential qualities and shape of Bonhoeffer's mature exegesis of the Psalms and defend my theory that Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms was built on the two pillars of the Psalms' relationship to prayer and to Jesus Christ the crucified. I will discuss the distinctiveness of these two pillars, along with how they work together in Bonhoeffer's conviction that Jesus Christ prayed the prayers of the Psalms in his incarnation. This chapter will conclude with a summary of the unique place Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms holds in the history of Psalms interpretation.

In chapters four and five, I will study two different bodies of later exegetical writing on the Psalms from Bonhoeffer. The first will be Bonhoeffer's partial commentary on Ps 119, written in the early months of 1940. The second will be the corpus of his writings on the Psalms from the time of Nazi imprisonment (1943–1945). The examination of these two bodies of writing will

provide an occasion to consider Bonhoeffer's hermeneutical approach toward the Psalms as originating in two different, non-academic settings. It will also open a window into the evolution of Bonhoeffer's approach as demonstrated in the latter years of his life. In the final sixth chapter of this dissertation, I will offer an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Bonhoeffer's hermeneutical and interpretation approach toward the Psalms for the church, and will explore the contributions Bonhoeffer's approach toward the Psalms might make to current and future scholarship in the areas of biblical studies.

CHAPTER ONE

BONHOEFFER'S INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALMS IN CONTEXT: AN HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE CHRISTOLOGICAL EXEGESIS OF THE PSALMS

Premodern Christological Exegesis of the Psalms

To speak of the Christological exegesis of the Psalms is, at once, to describe something keenly specific, and yet painfully ambiguous. The reason for this is because “Christological exegesis” in practice has both a particular and a diverse quality. It is particular in that it has as its telos the nature and person of Jesus Christ, which is distinct from a study of the Psalter, for example, aimed at exploring ancient cultic practices, or early forms of Mesopotamian poetry. Yet it is also diverse, even ambiguous, in that it does not have a singular, homogenous shape, but takes on various forms dependent upon the accepted exegetical practices and the varying intellectual, theological, and ecclesiological needs of a given time.

New Testament Exegesis of the Psalms

As Richard Price has rightly asserted, “The Christological exegesis of the Old Testament may be said to have begun on the road to Emmaus.”¹ It was here that Jesus demonstrated a new way of reading the Psalms which centered on his own life, death, and resurrection. As is recorded in the Gospel of Luke: “And beginning from Moses and from the prophets [Jesus] clarified to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures” (Lk 24:27).² With even greater precision Luke reports Jesus’s second appearance just seventeen verses later where Jesus

¹ Richard Price, “The Voice of Christ in the Psalms” in *Meditations of the Heart: The Psalms in Early Christian Thought and Practice: Essays in Honour of Andrew Louth*, ed. Andreas Andreopoulos, Augustine Casiday and Carol Harrison (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 1.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture translations are my own.

says to his disciples, “These are my words which I spoke to you while still being with you, that it was necessary for everything to be fulfilled which was written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets *and the Psalms*” (Lk 24:44).³ Propelled by this divine example, the New Testament writers applied an exegetical approach toward the Psalms that viewed Jesus as their focal point.⁴ As Dale A. Brueggemann summarily states:

Sometimes the New Testament uses the Psalter to prove Jesus’ arguments, sometimes to show that Jesus’ life was predicted, and sometimes to show that Jesus is the “Greater David.” Finally, any of those three methods might combine in an argument to prove Jesus’ divinity. This was not usually by prediction; rather, the typology established the basis of expectation. Sometimes this was by way of a typological connection deeply rooted in royal theology; however, the New Testament could also draw on incidentals from David’s life and rely on the overarching David-Jesus typology to sustain the connection. What was vital was that the connection between David and Jesus be seen.⁵

In applying the Psalms to Jesus, the early church eagerly took the baton from Jesus and made full use of the Psalter in a way which presumed it to be thoroughly Christological in nature. This meant, initially, that Jesus was freely recognized as the *object* of the Psalms—the One about whom the psalms spoke and the One to whom they witnessed.⁶

³ Emphasis added.

⁴ Gerard McLarney, *St. Augustine’s Interpretation of the Psalms of Ascent* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 12. It is not possible in this dissertation—nor is it necessary for a satisfactory exploration of my question—to thoroughly analyze the New Testament’s use of the Psalms as a witness to Jesus as the Messiah. This topic has been ably handled by numerous other scholars. For a treatment of the use of the Psalms in the Gospels and Acts see Dale A. Brueggemann, “The Evangelists and the Psalms” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005). For an analysis of the use of the Psalms in other New Testament writings see Harold W. Attridge, “Giving Voice to Jesus: Use of the Psalms in the New Testament,” in *Psalms in Community: Jewish and Christian Textual, Liturgical, and Artistic Traditions*, ed. Harold W. Attridge and Margot E. Fassler (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973); Donald H. Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

⁵ Brueggemann, “The Evangelists,” 278.

⁶ Quentin F. Wesselschmidt, “Introduction to Psalms 51–150” in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol. VII, ed. Quentin F. Wesselschmidt (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), xx, presents a sampling of the early church’s understanding of how the Psalms spoke prophetically of Jesus Christ: “Psalms 22 and 69 describe most fully the suffering of Christ. His rejection by the leaders of Israel was predicted in Psalm 118:22, and his being mocked and jeered during his suffering was foretold in Psalm 22:8. Psalm 41:9 and 55:12–14 speak of his being betrayed by a friend (Judas). Jesus’ being given vinegar to drink was prophesied in Psalm 69:21, and that

Early Church Exegesis of the Psalms

In the next few centuries of the church's history, it was confronted with numerous theological and doctrinal controversies that tested the clarity and consistency of its understanding of the nature and work of Jesus Christ. Against the threatening heterodoxies, the Psalter proved itself to be not only a confident ally but also a most formidable defense.⁷ Quentin F. Wesselschmidt offers a summary of some of the ways the Psalms were used to confront these specific heresies:

In response to the Gnostic belief that the visible, material world was created evil by the Demiurge, a defective god or aeon, the early fathers emphasized that the world was created good by the only true, triune God.... And in response to Gnostic and docetic views of the human nature of the incarnate Christ, which denied the reality of his human nature, they turned to quotations which clearly affirmed that his human nature was consubstantial with ours, with the exception of sin. Very helpful in this regard were the psalms which speak of a suffering Messiah, such as Psalms 22 and 69.... When Pelagianism arose at the beginning of the fifth century, the church fathers spent a considerable amount of ink proving the reality of original sin.... The early church fathers are firmly convinced that the Psalms, especially Psalm 51, very clearly attest to the reality of original sin and that it, along with actual sins, must be forgiven in order for believers to inherit eternal life.⁸

Foundational to these uses of the Psalms was, again, the assumption that they were not simply speaking about David in his historical context and experience. Principally, they were about Jesus Christ, the Anointed God-man who suffered and whose suffering was pre-figured and foretold in the psalms of Israel's king, David. This way of viewing the relationship of Jesus to the Psalms as their *object*—a perspective affirmed by the Gospels' numerous citations of and allusions to the Psalter in relation to the events surrounding Jesus's betrayal, suffering, and crucifixion—subsequently led to the identification of Jesus also as the speaker or *subject* of the

his clothes would be divided by lot in Psalm 22:18. His resurrection from the dead was foretold in Psalm 16:10 and his everlasting reign as priest and king in Psalm 110.”

⁷ Wesselschmidt, “Psalms 51–150,” xx.

⁸ Wesselschmidt, “Psalms 51–150,” xxi.

Psalms. If, for example, Ps 22 or Ps 69 speak prophetically about Jesus's suffering on the cross (see especially Ps 22:8 [HB 9], 18 [HB 19] and Ps 69:21 [HB 22]), could it not be rightly determined that, as first-person prayers, these psalms could be interpreted as being spoken *in toto* by Jesus, the One who ultimately fulfilled them (see Mt 27:43; 27:35; and 27:34, respectively)? What is emerging, then, in the early centuries of the church's history is a form of Christological exegesis of the Psalms based on a subject-object paradigm, a perspective endorsed by Jesus in Lk 24:27, 44, and set in motion by the writers of the New Testament.⁹

By the early decades of the second century, the Psalms had become deeply embedded in the fabric of the life and theology of the church. Brian E. Daley comments, "For the early church, the book of Psalms was 'daily bread': clearly one of the most important and familiar books of the Bible."¹⁰ The prominent use of the Psalms in daily life—both individual and corporate, personal and professional¹¹—prompted many theologians to devote significant energy to preaching and teaching from the Psalms.¹² Gerard McLarney observes that the Psalms were

⁹ Jacques Trublet, "Psaumes IV: Le Psautier et le Nouveau Testament," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique and mystique: Doctrine et histoire*, ed. M. Viller, et. al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 90. See also Daley, "Finding the Right Key," 13. Evident in this stage of the history of exegesis of the Psalms is a seminal understanding of Augustine's exegetical approach called *Totus Christus*. See below for more discussion on this approach.

¹⁰ Daley, "Finding the Right Key," 11. He continues, "Early Christian commentary on it is more abundant than on any other book of the Hebrew and Christian canon; we still possess partial or complete sets of homilies or scholarly commentaries on the psalms—sometimes more than one set—by at least twenty Latin or Greek patristic authors before 600[AD], and this interest did not abate in the medieval church. The main reason, undoubtedly, was the fact that the psalms were in constant use, both in public worship and in private prayer and meditation."

¹¹ Daley, "Finding the Right Key," 11–12, mentions a decree put forth by a synod at Laodicea in Phrygia which was aimed at curtailing the use of originally composed lyrics in the liturgy of the church. It appears that Gnostics were also producing their own poetry, which promoted their unorthodox teaching. Therefore, Daley notes, "By the mid-fourth century," the synod decreed: "It is not permitted that privately composed psalms or noncanonical books be read out in church, but only the canonical books of the New and Old Testament."

¹² Daley, "Finding the Right Key," 12–13. He continues, 13: "Writers of a more intellectual bend, however, recognized that it was those who used the psalms every day, giving a scripture voice to their prayer and using them as a structuring principle for their daily struggle, who most needed thorough and accurate Christian exegesis of the psalms if their *meditation* was to be different from magical incantations." In another article, Daley ("Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable? Reflections on Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 29 [2002]: 204), comments on the voluminous production of patristic and early medieval commentary writing on the Psalms, counting at least twenty known partial or complete commentaries by Latin and

often the first book a budding exegete explored. He observes that “the Psalms were a natural choice for those seeking to plumb the depths of scriptures in attempts to more fully grasp the mystery of Christ.”¹³ And, as Braulik proposes, the “Christology of the early church could to a large extent be described as a Christology of the Psalms, depicting Jesus Christ as being testified to in the Psalms of Israel and also as being interpreted by them.”¹⁴

Patristic Exegesis of the Psalms

Throughout the early church and patristic eras, Psalms commentaries—whether explicitly written as such, or edited together from sermons and lectures—began to expand their treatment of the Psalms from simple proof-texts to highly organized and nuanced publications which included literary introductions along with, in many instances, verse-by-verse and even word-by-word treatments of individual psalms.¹⁵ As theologians deepened their study and application of the texts of the Psalms, it should be noted that they generally continued to operate with a basic presupposition that Jesus was “the ultimate referent, the ‘bottom line,’” in the Psalms, and that he

Greek writers prior to AD 600, which is more than any other book in either the Old Testament or the New Testament. Holladay, *The Psalms*, 169, asserts that “The teachers in the church were always dealing with the Psalms, and there was never any distinction, such as we might make, between theology on the one hand and the critical interpretation of a commentary on the other. Scripture was always interpreted on the basis of the stated faith of the church, so that the commentaries that were produced were not overly distinct from sermons.”

¹³ McLarney, *St. Augustine’s Interpretation*, 22.

¹⁴ Georg P. Braulik, “Psalter and Messiah: Towards a Christological Understanding of the Psalms in the Old Testament and the Church Fathers” in *Psalms and Liturgy*, ed. Dirk J. Human and Cas J. Vos (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 15.

¹⁵ Brian E. Daley, “Finding the Right Key”, 16–17, speaks to the influence of ancient Greek and Roman literary exegesis on the structure of these commentaries: “Such exegesis moved principally on a linguistic level, beginning often with an explanation of difficult words—proper names, dialect forms, unusual metaphors or allusions—but would also include a wider discussion of the passage’s narrative content, its ‘plot’ The crowning moment of the grammarian’s skill, however—what won his art the name ‘criticism’—was thought by many to be his ‘judgment’ (κρίσις) of the poem’s or the passage’s value as a whole.” P.G. Walsh, “Introduction” in *Cassiodorus: Explanation of the Psalms*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (New York: Paulist, 1990), 6, suggests that similarity can be noted, for example, in the final section of Cassiodorus’s *Expositio psalmarum*, the *Conclusio*, in which he takes “a retrospective view of the main significance of the psalm [where] he is especially eager to exploit the psalms in refutation of the major heresies. . . . [T]he *Conclusio* is a convenient section in which to underline the need for theological orthodoxy.” Walsh argues that this part of Cassiodorus’s commentary is original among early Psalms commentaries.

was the “one [the Psalter] confessed ... to be the Messiah longed for by Israel, the promised Savior who brought to fulfillment God’s historical campaign to form for himself a holy people.”¹⁶ Not only was this determination informed by a prophetic and typological reading of the Psalms, which, as described above, yielded a subject-object reading of them in relation to Jesus,¹⁷ but it was also driven by a theological and doctrinal assumption active from the time of Origen. As Brian Daley summarizes, this assumption was “that these inspired scriptures formed a single book, which told, together, a single story of creation, instruction, judgment, and salvation by a single God.”¹⁸ Therefore, he continues, “if one confessed Jesus to be the Messiah longed for by Israel, the promised Savior who brought to fulfillment God’s historical campaign to form for himself a holy people,”¹⁹ then it was entirely justified to make Jesus the ultimate referent of all the Scriptures.

The one patristic theologian whose work in the Psalms has had the most profound impact on the history of the exegesis of the Psalms is Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430). Besides his plentiful collection of sermons on the Psalms and his frequent use of the Psalms in his other works, Augustine wrote a complete commentary on the Psalter. This commentary, entitled

¹⁶ Daley, “Finding the Right Key,” 14. Michael Fiedrowicz, “General Introduction” to *Exposition of the Psalms* in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2000), 27, states that early exegetes built on this assumption, “opening up ... the Old Testament so that Christian faith can understand it.” He additionally suggests that “[t]he business of interpretation was not simply to engage in historical research into the original meaning of the words within the Old Testament, and to treat of the psalmist’s intention, historically conditioned as this was. It had a much more important task: to unlock the meaning of the biblical words for the present day, through theological reflection and an interpretation applied to actual circumstances,” 24.

¹⁷ Price, “The Voice of Christ,” 1, suggests a NT impetus for the early church’s Christological exegesis of the Psalms can be found in “St. Paul’s insistence ... that ‘I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified’ (1 Cor 2:2). This,” he suggests, “took on a particular urgency in relation to the Psalter [because] the Psalter was recognized as the ‘Psalms of David’ while King David was seen as a prototype of Christ.”

¹⁸ Daley, “Finding the Right Key,” 14.

¹⁹ Daley, “Finding the Right Key,” 14. See also McLarney, *St. Augustine’s Interpretation*, 12.

Enarrationes in psalmos,²⁰ was written in stages across thirty years of the latter part of his life²¹ and has been hailed “as Augustine’s most important christological work.”²² A unique aspect to Augustine’s interpretative work on the Psalms is his tendency to “hold in tension both the concern for the interior life and the prosopological concern of determining the speaker of the text.”²³ The former is reflected in Augustine’s search for the text’s teaching on faith, hope, and love, a primary message he sought to discern.²⁴ The latter—a “prosopological concern”—is a more fully-developed expression of the early church’s understanding of Jesus as the *subject* of the Psalms, and deserves further explanation.

McLarney suggests that “One of Augustine’s major contributions to patristic exegesis is his treatment of the prosopological question in the Psalter.”²⁵ Prosopological exegesis entered the stream of Biblical studies in the writings of Origen, having originated in Greek grammatical and rhetorical studies.²⁶ Prosopological exegesis derives from a pursuit “to make clear who was the proper speaker in a psalm, and whether he was speaking in his own name or in the name (*ex*

²⁰ Saint Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 1–32*. Pt. III, vol. 15–20 in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2000–2004).

²¹ This fact means that *Enarrationes* does not necessarily present a thoroughgoing and unified picture of Augustine’s fully developed exegetical practice, but rather gives snap shots of a developing and maturing approach to interpreting the Psalms which is increasingly Christological.

²² Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 61. He also argues, 19, for Augustine’s approach to be accepted as exemplary even for today, describing him as “a model for a genuinely post-critical form of biblical interpretation.” See also Michael Cameron, *Augustine’s Construction of Figurative Exegesis against the Donatists in the Enarrationes in psalmos*, PhD. Dissertation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1997).

²³ McLarney, *St. Augustine’s Interpretation*, 19. For more on Augustine’s exegesis see Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine’s Early Figurative Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁴ James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 14–15. Greater attention will be given this topic below.

²⁵ McLarney, *St. Augustine’s Interpretation*, 66.

²⁶ It is important to note that neither prosopological exegesis nor the concept of *totus Christus* originated with Augustine. He was indebted to Tyconius (c. AD 379–423) who introduced a seminal form of these methods in *Book of Rules*, which was “the first treatise on biblical hermeneutics in the Latin West” (see Pamela Bright, *The Book of Rules of Tyconius: Its Purpose and Inner Logic* [Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1998], 2). Tyconius most likely borrowed his ideas from Origen, who was the earliest known exegete to introduce this concept to biblical hermeneutics (see Bernhard Neuschäfer, *Origenes als Philologe* [Basel: F. Reinhardt, 1987]).

persona/ex voce) of someone else.”²⁷ This determination, it was argued, “proves itself to be the way to the plenary sense of the biblical words.”²⁸ For, as Michael Fiedrowicz avers, “Not unless this could be clarified would the true understanding of a psalm be available.”²⁹

Ultimately, in Augustine’s analysis, “the ‘speaker’ of the Psalms [was] the voice of Christ—and not just Christ, but the ‘whole Christ’ (*totus Christus*).”³⁰ *Totus Christus* is a concept that derives from Augustine’s practice of prosopological exegesis and is a “Christological hermeneutic based on an emphasis on the solidarity between God and humanity in the incarnation of the Word and the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.”³¹ Augustine based this concept on the Apostle Paul’s understanding of the union between Christ and the church.³² As a

²⁷ Fiedrowicz, “General Introduction,” 51. Michael Cameron, “*Totus Christus* as Hermeneutical Center in *Enarrationes in Psalmos*” in *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms*, ed. Brian E. Daley and Paul R. Kolbet (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 205–26, provides a succinct account of the origins of prosopological exegesis as practiced by Augustine. See also Michael Slusser, “The Exegetical Roots of Trinitarian Theology,” *ThSt* 49 (1988): 461–76.

²⁸ Fiedrowicz, “General Introduction,” 52.

²⁹ Fiedrowicz, “General Introduction,” 51.

³⁰ McLarney, *St. Augustine’s Interpretation*, 19.

³¹ Aaron Canty, “Augustine’s *Totus Christus* Hermeneutic for Interpreting the Psalms,” *BR* 53 (2008): 67. This way of reading the Psalms was not always a hermeneutical presupposition for Augustine. Significant for the question of this dissertation, Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 62–63, identifies what he calls a “christological turn” in Augustine, which can be seen in his move from an analogical sense to a “more ‘dramatic’ approach to allegory. That is, one rooted not in a disjunction between *signum* and an eternal *res*, but in a *conjunction* between a temporal *signum* and an incarnate *res* — Jesus.” Discussing this “christological turn,” Byassee continues, 63: “It was not long before this hermeneutical shift produced exegetical fruit. In an early *enarratio*, Augustine reads Psalm 3 straight through with reference to Christ, and then begins again from the first verse reading with reference to the church. Soon he realizes there is no need to separate these two readings — for to speak of Christ as head is also to speak of Christ as body.” Cameron, “*Totus Christus*,” 212–13, sees Augustine’s *Psalmus contra partem Donati* as one of the earliest demonstrations of Augustine’s developing Christological exegesis of the Psalms. He identifies, 216, Augustine’s study of Ps 22 [21, LXX] as a “watershed in his career as a Christian reader of scripture.”

³² McLarney, *St. Augustine’s Interpretation*, 66: “The fundamental Pauline connection between Christ and his members (Acts 9:4; 1 Cor 12; Eph 5:30–32; cf. Matt 25:35–40) means that at times both the head of the body, namely Christ, and the members speak with one voice; at other times it is the body, others just the head, and still others the head speaks to the body.” Cameron, “*Totus Christus*,” 215, adds: “Augustine learned this from Paul’s teaching in Romans 5 and 6, where the apostle contrasts Adam and Christ and spoke of the old sinful human self as crucified with Christ. On the cross Jesus’s humble human will ‘took up’ the voice of Adam; that very act of embracing human death displayed the exchange of life for death that was the essence of redemption. Augustine discerned its intersection of three texts that so to say triangulated the psalm with the words of the crucified and his apostle; he fused the plaintive cry of Ps 21:2 with Christ’s cry of dereliction in Matthew 27:34 (Mark 15:34), and

way of clarifying Augustine's understanding, we can look to his comments on Ps 58:

We must always, or nearly always, hear Christ's voice speaking from a psalm in such a way that when we contemplate our head, the one mediator between God and humankind, himself human, Christ Jesus, we do not contemplate him in isolation.... We must think of him as head and body, one whole perfect man, for to us the apostle Paul says, *You are Christ's body, and his limbs* (1 Cor 12:27). And of Christ himself the same apostle declares that he is the Church's head. But if he is the head, and we are the body, the whole Christ consists of head and body.³³

Totus Christus came to be, for Augustine and for many who would follow him, a controlling hermeneutical lens for the Christological interpretation of the Psalms, revealing a commitment by premodern exegetes to offer a spiritually edifying interpretation to the Psalms in line with the words of Jesus in Lk 24:44.³⁴

This concern for a "spiritually edifying," Christ-focused interpretation of the Psalms also contributed to the development of another highly utilized interpretive approach called the allegorical method of interpretation.³⁵ The allegorical method was, for many patristic theologians, *the answer* to the interpretative challenge of the Old Testament when it appeared in its "literal, historical meaning [to have] little to offer as a book for Christians."³⁶ Allegorical

with Paul's articulation of our redemptive union with him in Romans 6:3–9 (especially v. 6)."

³³ Saint Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms: 51–72*. Pt. III, vol. 17 in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2001). Emphasis original.

³⁴ Fiedrowicz, "General Introduction," 24, notes that this desire to "unlock the meaning of the biblical words for the present day", under the umbrella of a proper Christological perspective "was typical of patristic exegetes" and put "Augustine's method of exposition ... in paths traced already by scripture itself and by exegetical and homiletical tradition" of his day.

³⁵ The allegorical method of interpreting the Scriptures is a topic of considerable import to Psalms studies. It has been given new light through the recent publication of the multi-volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. See especially *Psalms 1–50*, Vol VII, ed. Craig A. Blasing and Carmen S. Hardin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008) and *Psalms 51–150* Vol VIII, ed. Quentin F. Wesselschmidt (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007). A reevaluation of the value of reading the Psalms allegorically has been made by Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*. While the allegorical interpretation of the Psalms is certainly important to the study of the exegesis of the Psalms, I am only able, within the narrow scope of this dissertation, to touch briefly on its characteristics and practice, with special emphasis on its usefulness in the premodern era to serve a Christ-focused interpretation of the Psalms. McLarney, *St. Augustine's Interpretation*, 59–63, provides a succinct definition of the terms pertinent to a discussion of the method allegorical. In addition to Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, see also John Whitman, ed., *Interpretation & Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (Boston: Brill, 2003).

³⁶ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 10. See also William Hornbury, "Old Testament Interpretation in the

exegesis sought to identify the text's fuller, spiritually-edifying meaning, looking for ways in which, at times, "one thing is said [but] another meant."³⁷ As Preus observes, Augustine was greatly aided by this method, being "rooted out of his anti-Old Testament views by the allegorical preaching of Saint Ambrose at Milan."³⁸ Later, Augustine would make regular use of this approach in his *Enarrationes* as he sought to bring to the Psalms "a new savor and a fuller meaning," making it possible "to taste the 'wisdom of Christ' in their words."³⁹ Over the ensuing centuries, medieval scholars, such as James Perez of Valencia (d. AD 1490), would continue to practice and expand this method.⁴⁰

Yet, not all premodern theologians fully embraced the allegorical method. As Bradley Nassif details, "In the fourth century, representatives from the Antiochene school of exegesis such as John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia, attacked Origen's allegorical method for its dehistoricizing, philosophizing, arbitrary and elitist characteristics."⁴¹ Among others, Preus describes the early Scholastic theologian Hugh of Saint Victor (AD 1096–1141) as particularly

Writings of the Church Fathers" in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 767–68. The history of debate over the definition of the term "literal" in biblical studies is carefully explored by Preus in *From Shadow to Promise*. It will be discussed further below. As the term is used in this section, it is in reference to the meaning of the text in its original historical *Sitz im Leben*.

³⁷ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 26. See also David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *ThTo* 37, no. 1 (April 1980): 30.

³⁸ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 10. For a summary of Augustine's conversion and theological development, see Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody, MA: Prince, 1984), 208–12.

³⁹ Fiedrowicz, "General Introduction," 65. Among many examples, one can consider Augustine's treatment of Ps 45, a psalm that garnered considerable attention as a messianic psalm during the Christological debates of the third and fourth centuries. In v. 8 [HB 9] the text reads, "All of your garments [are fragrant with] myrrh and aloes [and] cassia." On this verse Augustine (Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., "Augustine: Exposition of the Book of Psalms." Pages 145–55 in vol. 8 in *A Select Library of the Christian Church: NPNF* first series [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995], 152) comments: "By His garments are meant His Saints, His elect, His whole Church, which he shows forth, as his garment, so to speak; His robe 'without spot and wrinkle,' which on account of its spots He has 'washed' in His blood."

⁴⁰ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 102–7.

⁴¹ Bradley Nassif, "Origen (c. 185–253/54)" in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 59–60.

critical of allegorical excesses,⁴² even as Hugh “admits that sometimes the literal meaning [of a text] makes little sense, or appears ‘incongrua.’” In these instances, Hugh advocates a spiritual or theological reading which must, he requires, be confirmed by clear New Testament teaching. It is this type of mixed reception that continues to accompany the allegorical method throughout the premodern era. For, even though it greatly aided exegetes in offering a Christ-focused and “edifying” rendering of the Psalms for the premodern church,⁴³ it also produced the unfortunate outcome of labeling large parts of the Old Testament as “unedifying,” and thus in need of being “raised to the level of the normative literal sense, which the New Testament provides.”⁴⁴

Monastic Exegesis of the Psalms

Emerging in the wake of the perceived opulence and spiritual complacency of the Constantinian-era church was the influential activity of medieval monasticism. Woven into the daily patterns of these ascetic communities was the regimented communal practice of praying the Psalms via a continual reading (*lectio continua*) of the Psalter.⁴⁵ This practice engrossed the monastic community in a devotional interaction with the text of the Psalms guiding many of them through all 150 Psalms on a weekly basis. Presumed in the monastic reading of the Psalms was the broadly-practiced Christological approaches of patristic exegetes. As Richard Price suggests, since “the monastic movement . . . made the recitation of the Psalter the main form of

⁴² Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 28–31.

⁴³ It should be noted that allegorical exegesis was also used in premodern times not just to produce a reading of the Psalms in light of Jesus Christ and his work of salvation. It was also employed to yield a didactic or moral emphasis. See, for example, the explanation of the commentary of Didymus the Blind on Psalm 24 in Albert-Kees Geljon, “Didymus the Blind: Commentary on Psalm 24 (23 LXX): Introduction, Translation and Commentary,” *VC* 65 (2011): 50–73.

⁴⁴ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 15. Preus, 15–16, suggests that this was not the opinion held by all patristic and medieval exegetes, but it is certainly evidenced in some later medieval thought that “one could assert, without qualification, that the whole Old Testament is [viewed as] allegory (that is, a letter to be allegorized).” As will be discussed below, Martin Luther provided a needed corrective to this “hermeneutical divide” between the Old Testament and the New Testament, particularly in his second lectures on the Psalms.

⁴⁵ See Holladay, *The Psalms*, 176; Gonzalez, *The Story*, 241.

Christian prayer . . . , [it] followed that, if Christ was to be the focus of Christian prayer, he had to be found in the Psalter.”⁴⁶ As the medieval exegetes continued to understand “the psalms as prophecy, especially in relation to Jesus Christ,”⁴⁷ they additionally sought through their commentaries “to inspire unction and compunction in their monastic audience.”⁴⁸

Monasticism’s intense study and interaction with the text of Scripture presented a need for liturgical and scholarly books to be produced and copied. This eventually led to the creation of schools of learning established within monastic communities.⁴⁹ In time, similar “cathedral schools” took root in church-based settings, and, by the early thirteenth century, populous cities were becoming hosts for new centers of academic inquiry called universities.⁵⁰ Out of this new academic context developed an approach to the study of the Bible substantially influenced by traditional philosophical and secular methods. *Scholasticism*, as this new approach was termed, employed contemporary intellectual paradigms and put forth a new model of biblical commentary which had as its ideal context the university classroom.

Scholastic Exegesis of the Psalms

One of the first notable scholastic commentators on the Psalms was Gilbert of Poitiers (AD 1070–1154). Mary L. Colish notes that Gilbert eschews “the devotional and hortatory approach to the Psalms typical of the monastic exegetes . . . [while] he systematically targets specific

⁴⁶ Price, “The Voice of Christ,” 1.

⁴⁷ Howard Neil Wallace, *Words to God, Words from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 10.

⁴⁸ Mary L. Colish, “Psalterium Scholasticorum: Peter Lombard and the Emergence of Scholastic Psalms Exegesis,” *Spec* 67, no. 3 (July 1992): 531.

⁴⁹ Gonzalez, *The Story*, 241: “Although Benedict himself had little to say about study, soon this was one of the main occupations of Benedictine monks. In order to celebrate the Divine Office, books were needed. Monks became adept at copying both the Bible and other books, and thus preserved them for later generations. Their houses also became teaching centers.”

⁵⁰ Gonzalez, *The Story*, 311–12.

scholastic concerns” such as issues of genre, theme, and literary development.⁵¹ Colish goes on to say that Gilbert is the “first scholastic exegete of the Psalms to develop theological *quaestiones* out of the text,” noting that he does so “in the context of his prevailing Christological and moral emphasis.”⁵² These *quaestiones*, stated and expounded upon in a parallel column of Gilbert’s commentary, were drawn exegetically from the psalms and offered Gilbert’s answers to particular difficulties and topics raised within the text of the psalms.⁵³ Even as Gilbert introduced a highly thematic and systematic approach to the study of the Psalms, he, like other late medieval scholars, still showed respect and dependence upon Augustine’s *totus Christus* hermeneutic which held that “the Psalms speak of Christ and . . . refer to him both in the head and the members.”⁵⁴

Taking clearer shape throughout the medieval era was a versatile and evolving exegetical approach known as the fourfold sense of Scripture.⁵⁵ This approach was initially given methodological shape by John Cassian (d. AD 435), who defined the four senses of Scripture as

⁵¹ Colish, “Psalterium Scholasticorum,” 536–37. Theresa Gross-Diaz *The Psalms Commentary of Gilbert of Poitiers: From Lectio Divina to the Lecture Room* (New York: Brill, 1996), 62–63, offers the following as a sampling of topics in Gilbert’s cross-index: on the two natures of Christ; on prayers; the first coming (the incarnation); the Church Triumphant; the Church Militant.

⁵² Colish, “Psalterium Scholasticorum,” 537.

⁵³ Gross-Diaz, *Gilbert of Poitiers*, 60–61. She continues, 61–62: “In the course of explicating a given biblical text line by line, which was the normal procedure for the study of *sacra pagina* at Laon, the master would interrupt himself, or perhaps be interrupted by a student, in order to look more closely at a particular problem raised by the text. These *quaestiones* could take note of conflicting interpretations of a text by various *auctoritates*, but they could also comprise discussions of moral and pastoral issues which the scriptural passages suggest. The results of these investigations were *sententiae*, pronouncements of opinion based on a thorough examination of biblical and patristic sources as well as on the certainty of faith.”

⁵⁴ Colish, “Psalterium Scholasticorum,” 537–38.

⁵⁵ One of the most thorough treatments of the fourfold sense is Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l’écriture*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959–1964); the first two volumes have been translated into English as Henri de Lubac, *The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 1 of *MedExeg*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) and as Henri de Lubac, *The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 2 of *MedExeg*, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). For a shorter treatment consult Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 27–38. In recent years there has been a resurgence in the promotion of spiritual, and in particular, allegorical, reading of the Psalms. See Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*.

the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses.⁵⁶ The first sense, perhaps more clearly labeled the literal-historical sense,⁵⁷ represented the original historical setting and message of the human author. The other three senses, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical—often described as the three spiritual senses—were rooted in the literal-historical sense and served to address the three Augustinian concerns of faith, hope, and love, respectively. David C. Steinmetz provides the following scenario as a defense of the value of this fourfold approach, particularly the three spiritual senses:

How was a French parish priest in 1150 to understand Psalm 137, which bemoans captivity in Babylon, makes rude remarks about Edomites, expresses an ineradicable longing for a glimpse of Jerusalem, and pronounces a blessing on anyone who avenges the destruction of the temple by dashing Babylonian children against a rock? The priest lives in Concale, not Babylon, has no personal quarrel with Edomites, cherishes no ambitions to visit Jerusalem (though he might fancy a holiday in Paris), and is expressly forbidden by Jesus to avenge himself on his enemies. Unless Psalm 137 has more than one possible meaning, it cannot be used as a prayer by the church and must be rejected as a lament belonging exclusively to the piety of ancient Israel.⁵⁸

Interpretation of this psalm according to the three spiritual senses, then, served medieval exegetes by helping them bridge the Old Testament-New Testament hermeneutical divide so that they could find theological and normative value in the psalm and thus make the greatest possible use of it in the life and faith of their communities. Steinmetz continues,

⁵⁶ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 21–22. Steinmetz, “Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 30, provides this helpful explanation of these terms: “The *literal* sense of Scripture could and usually did nurture the three theological virtues, but when it did not, the exegete could appeal to three additional spiritual senses, each sense corresponding to one of the virtues. The *allegorical* sense taught about the church and what it should believe, and so it corresponded to the virtue of faith. The *tropological* sense taught about individuals and what they should do, and so it corresponded to the virtue of love. The *anagogical* sense pointed to the future and wakened expectation, and so it corresponded to the virtue of hope.” Emphasis added.

⁵⁷ Preus, in *From Shadow to Promise*, explores the problem of defining the “literal” sense of Scripture in the medieval era. When understood as comprising the “literal” (or true) meaning of the text (*sensus litteralis*), one encountered problems particularly with Old Testament texts which, as Steinmetz highlights in “Pre-Critical Exegesis,” do not clearly serve a spiritually edifying purpose in-and-of themselves. It was argued that, in these cases, the “literal” sense does not express the *sensus litteralis* of the text.

⁵⁸ Steinmetz, “Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 30–31.

This hermeneutical device [i.e., the fourfold sense] made it possible for the church to pray directly and without qualification even a troubling Psalm like 137. After all, Jerusalem was not merely a city in the Middle East; it was, according to the *allegorical* sense, the church; according to the *tropological* sense, the faithful soul; and according to the *anagogical* sense, the center of God's new creation. The Psalm became a lament of those who long for the establishment of God's future kingdom and who are trapped in this disordered and troubled world, which with all its delights is still not their home. They seek an abiding city elsewhere. The imprecations against the Edomites and the Babylonians are transmuted into condemnations of the world, the flesh, and the devil.⁵⁹

As time progressed, increased reliance on the three “spiritual” senses (in particular, the allegorical sense), raised concern among medieval exegetes such as Hugh of Saint Victor (AD 1096–1141) and Thomas Aquinas (c. AD 1224–1274).⁶⁰ Their concern was over an apparent diminution of the Bible’s literal-historical sense, which, for them, included the historical-grammatical characteristics of the Biblical text. Their exegetical concern was over a proper “control” on spiritual interpretation, because, they maintained, “Only by proper understanding of the literal [meaning literal-historical] sense ... can proper *theological* understanding of Scripture arise.”⁶¹ Scott Hendrix observes how medieval exegetes sought to repair this deficiency:

Moving in one direction under the influence of Jewish exegesis in northern France, the school of St. Victor concentrated on the letter of the Old Testament text and its historical setting. Nicholas of Lyra, while making use of Jewish exegesis in explaining the historical sense, moved in a different direction. As Thomas Aquinas had done, Lyra posited a double literal sense: one intended by the human author and the other, often referred to as the true literal sense, intended by the divine author, the Holy Spirit. For the Old Testament, this theory meant that a christological interpretation, intended by the Spirit, was as much or more so a literal meaning as that which the text had in its original setting. Concentration on this true literal sense

⁵⁹ Steinmetz, “Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 30.

⁶⁰ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 28–31, describes Hugh of Saint Victor (AD 1096–1141), among others, as particularly critical of allegorical excesses. However, Preus continues: “Hugh nevertheless admits that sometimes the literal meaning makes little sense, or appears ‘incongrua.’” In these instances, Hugh advocates a spiritual or theological reading which must, he required, be confirmed by clear New Testament teaching. See Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 9–53, who addresses the concerns of modern and post-modern exegetes with allegory and calls for “the restoration of classical Christian allegory” (18).

⁶¹ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 30–31. Emphasis original. He summarizes the main concern concisely: “Allegorical ... interpretation is bound to go awry if the literal meaning is misunderstood.” See also, Steinmetz, “Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 32, 37.

of the Old Testament led late medieval exegetes whom Luther consulted, such as Jacob Perez of Valencia and Jacques Lefèvre, to an intensive christological interpretation of books like the Psalms.⁶²

Luther and the Reformation Exegesis of the Psalms

As this quote reveals, interpretation of the Psalms in the late medieval period continued to assume and pursue a Christ-focused perspective, even as debates raged over the best means of achieving that end. The fourfold sense of Scripture was a primary exegetical paradigm employed by Scholastic exegetes, with special emphasis being given to the three “spiritual” senses—the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. The theory of a double-literal sense prioritized a Christ-focused interpretation of the Psalms, even as it added to the concomitant diminution of the historical value of the Old Testament.⁶³ It was into this milieu that the Augustinian monk Martin Luther (AD 1483–1546) took up his post as Doctor of the Bible at the University of Wittenburg in 1512. As James S. Preus argues, Luther “began his career steeped in the presuppositions, methods, and problems of medieval exegesis.”⁶⁴ This included a regular use of the fourfold sense in his biblical hermeneutics. Yet he did not remain in this position for long. Gerhard Ebeling has traced the evolution of Luther’s exegesis of the Psalms between the times of his first and his second lectures on the Psalms. Ebeling observes that,

⁶² Scott H. Hendrix, “Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation,” *Int* 37, no. 3 (July 1983): 232. Also worth mentioning alongside other prominent medieval Psalms scholars is Peter Lombard (AD 1100–1160). Colish, 532, states that “Among [the] scholastic exegetes of the Psalms in the first half of the twelfth century, Peter Lombard holds pride of place. [His commentary on the Psalms] became the scholastic commentary of choice.” She continues, 539–40, Lombard “agrees entirely with Augustine and previous commentators that the subject matter [of the Psalms] is Christ and that Psalms should be read typologically as well as morally in that Christ is the new Adam, the source of the new man who replaces fallen man. But he adds his own twist to this tradition. In referring to Christ as the head of the body which is the church, he observes that the Psalms speak of Christ sometimes according to his divinity, sometimes according to his humanity, and sometimes metaphorically (‘per transumptionem’); he gives examples of each mode, citing Psalm 109, Psalm 3, and Psalm 21 as respective illustrations of each of them.”

⁶³ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 143.

⁶⁴ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 1.

in [Luther's] incipient exegetical work, namely his early *Lectures on the Psalms* (*Dictata Super Psalterium*) of 1513-1515,⁶⁵ he is still entirely confined to the paths of medieval exegetical practice and makes use of the method of the fourfold sense of Scripture (the *Quadrigena*).... [His] first great exegetical work in which the change of expository method is displayed in its fully mature form [is the *Operationes in Psalmos*].⁶⁶ In between, beginning with the *Lectures on the Epistle To the Romans*, lies a period of transition. It results in the radical abandonment of the *Quadrigena* and also a fundamental critique of allegory.⁶⁷

Luther's *Dictata Super Psalterium* reflects the traditional medieval exegesis of previous centuries. In these lectures he interprets the Psalms prophetically and views the voice of David to be the voice of Jesus Christ speaking in the person of David. By the time of his second Psalms lectures, *Operationes in Psalmos*, he stood on the other side of his reformation epiphany, having come to a reinvigorated understanding of both the Gospel and of justification as the central doctrine of Scripture. Utilizing new linguistic tools at his disposal—including a new Hebrew lexicon, a new Greek New Testament, and LXX— and Hebrew-based Psalters—Luther's *Operationes* demonstrates a Christological interpretation which is more comfortable with letting “the literal sense of the text [conform] to the historical order of things” where “attention is focused on people ‘*ante adventum Christi*.’”⁶⁸ Preus describes this shift in his summary of Luther's exegesis of the penitential psalm, Ps 102:

the psalmist's own words, spoken out of his own circumstances, is the basis of the theological interpretation. He prays out of longing for the coming of Christ, who in three analogous situations is not yet present in the desired way. Now Christ, rather than being the ‘prophetic-literal’ sense, that is, the point of departure for a spiritual exegesis, becomes the goal or *telos* of the whole exegesis. And the *applicatio* springs not from the Christian's likeness to Christ, but from his likeness to the Old Testament speaker, with whom he shared the anticipation of the Coming One.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, *WA* 3 (Pss 1–83), and *WA* 4 (Pss 84–150).

⁶⁶ Luther, *WA* 5 (Pss 1–22).

⁶⁷ Gerhard Ebeling, “The Beginnings of Luther's Hermeneutics,” *LQ* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 131.

⁶⁸ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 171. Emphasis original.

⁶⁹ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 171. Preus continues his analysis of Luther's latter treatment of Ps 130: “Although the psalmist is viewed as a ‘prophet’ who sees the redemption already accomplished in Christ, the

The subtle shift noted here by Preus is observable in the change of value Luther gives to the literal-historical sense of the psalm. He does not dismiss the psalmist as mere *figura*, meaning one whose existence has no substantive meaning in itself, but only as it functions to point to or prefigure a greater NT understanding or fulfillment.⁷⁰ Rather, he draws out from the psalmist's experience an expectation for Christ which is common to both the psalmist and the Christian who is presently praying this psalm. This expectation issues forth in a petition for Christ which both the historical and present-day pray-ers can equally offer. Preus explains that "Luther has seen a parallel, an analogy, of situations in the lives of the Old Testament faithful and the Christian. For the Old Testament believer to be under the law and asking for Christ is the same as for the Christian to be in sin and asking for forgiveness."⁷¹ Preus then goes on to summarize the following notable changes Luther brought to the interpretation of the Psalms:

First, there is a noticeable shift in the basic material for exegesis ... from Christ and the Church as the subject matter and speaker to the actual Old Testament, pre-advent situation. Second, ... the literal, primary, and proper sense of all the Psalms is the "prophetic" sense. But ... a fundamental change appears in the meaning of "prophetic." In [Luther's earlier interpretation of Psalm 51], David's word is prophetic because he speaks 'in the person of the Church,' or as 'part of the church' But in [the later interpretation of] Psalm [143], the prophetic speaker is the 'faithful synagogue' awaiting Christ's first advent. The voice of the Old Testament people, speaking as themselves, is now heard.... Finally, a structural schema of multiple exegesis appears at Psalm [102], which is quite different from the traditional fourfold one. The traditional schema was built on the providential character of literal historical events as *signa*, whose *res* were, successively, Christ-church (allegorical), grace-merit (tropological), and the *visio dei* (anagogical).

interpretive standpoint is within the actual Old Testament situation."

⁷⁰ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, speaks at length of the significance of this turn in Luther's interpretation of the Old Testament. He elucidates its significance by noting, 174, that "This change involves a striking difference in the *application*. In the earlier exegesis, there was an identification (*tropologice*) of Christ and the believer as against the Old Testament figure, who either did not appear at all on the horizon of interpretation, or else (as in Psalm 50) prophesied and theologized as an on-the-scene New Testament theologian, and was therefore a radically 'special person' elevated in prophetic isolation from among his contemporaries. In the later exegesis, by contrast, there is a communion of the *whole* people of God—the 'communio sanctorum'—in their expectation and petition for Christ, and an accompanying tendency to broaden the Old Testament speaker to include, as it were, a faithful remnant." See also McLarney, *St. Augustine's Interpretation*, 59–63.

⁷¹ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 172.

Luther's schema is built on three comings of Christ: in flesh, in the soul, and eschatologically. The common goal (and therefore the single *res*) of the exegesis is Christ's coming."⁷²

Luther's interpretation of the Psalms validates the edifying nature of the Old Testament in the way that it redefined the conception of the Christological sense of the Psalms, not as a

cryptic description of Christ and the Church ... [but] as a *testimonia* and *promissa* concerning the future to arouse the faith, the *expectatio*, and the *petitio* of the Old Testament hearers as a whole. In this framework, the Old Testament gets theological value not so much from the Christ it hiddenly describes as from the salvation it promises, and from the faith and expectation of the faithful whom this word invites.⁷³

Although Preus's overall argument is sound, caution is recommended by Scott Hendrix who warns that Preus's analysis gives Luther too much credit for initiating a new hermeneutical turn in the interpretation of the Psalms. As Hendrix writes in *Ecclesia in Via*,

Preus maintains that Luther "discovered" the faithful synagogue, "an exegetical rubric that would have been impossible for the 'medieval Luther'...." In fact, the *synagoga fidelis* is impossible neither for the "medieval Luther" of Preus (the first reference occurs in Luther's comments to Psalm 41) nor, as we know, for the medieval Psalms commenters themselves. Preus was unable to find the *synagoga fidelis* in the tradition because it is mentioned by the commentators predominately in connection with the name of Asaph, the alleged author of Psalms 49 and 72-82, whereas Luther employs the faithful synagogue primarily in the later part of the *Dictata*. As a result, it is more correct to say that Luther redeploys the *synagoga fidelis* within the ranks of his comments on the Psalms; by no means does he discover or invent it.⁷⁴

⁷² Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 173. The bracketed Psalm chapters in the quote reflect Preus's use of the LXX's numbering within Luther's lectures. I have replaced the LXX's Psalms numbering with the English Psalms numbers in brackets.

⁷³ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 186. Although it is evident that Luther's exegetical approach shifts from a prophetic-Christological reading of the Psalter to more of an historical interpretation, Scott Hendrix, in *Ecclesia in Via: Ecclesiological Developments in the Medieval Psalms Exegesis and the Dictata Super Psalterium [1513-1515] of Martin Luther*. Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 266-83, warns against attributing excessive credit for this exegetical shift to Luther. Rather, he suggests Luther is reflecting a tradition already present in early church and medieval Psalms exegesis, which interprets the psalms in the voice of the *synagoga fidelis* rather than in the voice of Christ. For a more in-depth discussion of this see Hendrix, *Ecclesia in Via*, 141-287; Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background," 229-39.

⁷⁴ Scott Hendrix, *Ecclesia in Via*, 272-73. Hendrix, "Luther Against the Backdrop," 234, also adds: "Luther agreed with the late medieval exegetes that the proper (or 'true literal') sense of Scripture is that which the Spirit intends, but he did not always demand a reference to Christ. The legitimate sense could also involve the experience of the Old Testament faithful.... Luther's exegesis, therefore, differs from the medieval tradition not in the absence of allegory or of christological interpretation of the Old Testament but rather in his aversion to excessive

Despite arguments over the exact nature and timing of Luther's exegetical shifts—and over how inventive or traditional he was in his approach—there is no doubt that Luther's lectures in the Psalms faithfully demonstrate an evolution of the premodern pursuit of a Christological perspective of the Psalms which can serve the church's faith in Jesus Christ.

Modernity's Problem with a Christological Interpretation of the Psalms

The Christological perspective of the Psalms demonstrated as broadly assumed by premodern exegetes would be dramatically challenged by modern era scholars. The general Christological understanding which functioned both as the hermeneutical key and the *telos* of faithful interpretation of the Psalms in the premodern era was eventually displaced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the priority of scientific verification,⁷⁵ which demanded a method of studying the Bible unencumbered by ecclesiological or theological authority.⁷⁶ Biblical studies' change of *loci* from the context of the church to the university gave modern scholars autonomy from traditionally-held interpretive presuppositions and conclusions.⁷⁷ When

allegorizing and in his willingness to find the legitimate meaning in the grammatical and historical analysis of the text. For Luther it was not a matter of choosing one level of meaning (i.e., literal or spiritual) over another but of choosing the meaning of the text which best fit the significance of the words, the historical circumstance, and his own theological perspective.”

⁷⁵ Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 84, summarizes the basic principle of historical critical theology: “Research is conducted *ut si Deus non daretur* (‘as if there were no God’). That means the reality of God is excluded from consideration from the start, even if the researcher acknowledges that God could bear witness of himself in his Word. The standard by which all is assessed is not God's Word but scientific principle.”

⁷⁶ John Goldingay, “Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern in Old Testament Study,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Gunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 16, concurs: “Biblical criticism [of the modern era] declined to be bound by the church's tradition regarding Scripture's meaning, whether this was more Catholic tradition or more Protestant/evangelical tradition. That opened up new possibilities of entering into what was going on ... and of escaping from the interpretations of the Christian tradition that had overlaid God's word, especially in the OT.” See also Edgar Krentz, *The Historical Critical Method* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 4.

⁷⁷ Brock, *Singing*, 100–1, also assesses: “The story of the interaction between the Christian and modern exegetical traditions is a familiar one. By the nineteenth century, the gradual loosening of ties between the university, churches, and synagogues begun in the eighteenth century allowed a stable academic exegetical tradition to form that distanced itself from the Christian faith tradition. Questions not previously asked by Christian

combined with the academy's increasing hermeneutic of suspicion toward the Bible's historical accuracy, there developed an antagonistic relationship between modern scholarship and the church, which continued to hold to an understanding of the Psalms informed by premodern exegetes.⁷⁸ This disparity, reflected in divergent interpretative presuppositions and conclusions, set in motion within the larger community of Biblical scholars a thorough reevaluation of both the validity and accuracy of interpreting the Psalms Christologically.⁷⁹

Representative of these changes were numerous eighteenth and nineteenth century exegetical writings which emphasized "historical-critical approaches (dominated by the search for hypothetical sources behind—and radical reconstructions of—the text), and on reconstructions of Israel's history and the history of its religion."⁸⁰ Modern exegetes—making use of scientific, historical, and sociological methods—often viewed the Psalms not as inspired texts giving testimony to Jesus Christ, but as artifacts of history which primarily provided glimpses into ancient culture, literature, and religion.⁸¹ As Gerstenberger observes, commentaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not typically view the Psalms' Christological perspective as a controlling factor of their research. Rather, their aim was to get *behind* the text and inquire of the psalm's and the psalmist's context, state-of-mind, and poetic interpretation of

interpreters of Scripture came to dominate this discourse. The effect on Psalms exegesis was that a text-critical inquiry into the historicity of Psalms headings developed into a wholesale questioning of the ascription of Psalms to the named authors, and culminated in the widely held opinion that the Psalms were a haphazardly arranged collection used as a songbook in a late period of Israel's history."

⁷⁸ Holladay, *The Psalms*, 251, cites that in these decades "scholars, especially in Germany, began to analyze biblical texts with the techniques of literary and historical criticism, rather than to be content to view them simply as divine works beyond the reach of such inquiry."

⁷⁹ Holladay, *The Psalms*, 252.

⁸⁰ David M. Howard, Jr., "Recent Trends in Psalms Study" in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. by David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 330.

⁸¹ Erhard Gerstenberger, "Psalms" in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. John H. Hayes (San Antonio, TX.: Trinity University Press, 1977), 180. Gerstenberger cites the following as notable Psalms scholars of the nineteenth century: Thomas Kelly Cheyne (AD 1841–1915), Charles Augustus Briggs (AD 1841–1913), Rudolph Kittel (AD 1853–1929), and Bernhard Duhm (AD 1847–1928). See also Holladay, *The Psalms*, 251

events:

[Old Testament] scholars between 1800 and 1920 mainly dedicated themselves to uncovering in each psalm traces of the history of Israel; and they were eager to learn how the psalmist had put their personal experiences of national affairs into words and poetic structures.... History and psyche were of burning interest to nineteenth-century thinkers, philosophers and theologians alike.... Small wonder, then, that essays and commentaries on the Psalter would, as a rule, concentrate on the personal and historical features in each poem and on literary techniques used.⁸²

Two of the most substantive modern era Psalms scholars were Hermann Gunkel⁸³ (AD 1862–1932) and his student Sigmund Mowinckel⁸⁴ (AD 1884–1965).⁸⁵ Gunkel, known as the “father of form criticism” (*Formgeschichte*), employed a literary approach to the study of the Psalms and identified primary categories of genre in the Psalter, which included the lament, blessing, hymn, royal psalm, wisdom psalm, and legend. Gunkel, like Mowinckel, emphasized the *Sitz im Leben* of the Psalms but, in contrast to his student, considered the Psalms to be “essentially personal and private compositions, even when produced to express a public or communal mood.”⁸⁶ Mowinckel, on the other hand, emphasized the social and religious context of the psalms and was less concerned with the thought of the Psalter’s authors. He

became a historian of religion and cult, assuming that psalms had been written for the sake of their role in the actual ceremonial of worship rather than simply for the sake of expressing the experience of an individual. This resulted in his conviction that the

⁸² Gerstenberger, “Psalms,” 180.

⁸³ Gunkel’s major writings on the Psalter include: *Ausgewählte Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1904); *Die Psalmen übersezt und erklärt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprechts, 1926); *Einleitung in die Psalmen: Die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israel*, completed by J. Begrich (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933).

⁸⁴ Mowinckel’s major writings on the Psalter include: *Køngesalmerne i det Gamle Testamente* (Oslo: Kristiania, 1916); *Psalmestudier*, 6 vols. (Oslo: Kristinaia, 1921–1924); *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* (New York: Abingdon, 1964).

⁸⁵ Howard, Jr. “Recent Trends,” 331, cites how “Psalms scholarship has been shaped by the work of Gunkel and Mowinckel” ever since the 1920’s. Moreover, he observes that “Commentaries until very recently have reflected the same concerns” brought out by Gunkel and Mowinckel, namely “the forms [of the psalms] and the cultic place and significance of the Psalms.”

⁸⁶ Gene. M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), iv. Carl J. Bosma, “Discerning the Voices in the Psalms: A Discussion of Two Problems in Psalmic Interpretation,” *CTJ* 43 (2008): 185, labels Gunkel’s method a “spiritualizing” approach which was “marked by a radical anticultic spirit.”

original context of nearly all the psalms was the cultic setting, and in particular, a reconstructed “Enthronement of Yahweh Festival.”⁸⁷

The impact of Gunkel’s and Mowinckel’s work on the history of interpretation of the Psalms cannot be overestimated. Gunkel’s psalms categories continue to guide current study of and commentary on the Psalter. And, as Jerome F. D. Creach asserts, the general arc of Mowinckel’s research on the Psalms’ relationship to the cult has “dominated psalms research [into] the first three quarters of the twentieth century.”⁸⁸ However, it should be observed that these new developments in scholarly research have often been concomitant with a diminishing appreciation for the Psalms’ Christological meaning and their contribution to the spiritual life of the church.⁸⁹

Conclusion

What this overview of the first two-thousand years of the church’s interpretation of the Psalms has demonstrated is how exegetes across that time have interacted with the Psalms in terms of its interpretative relationship to Jesus Christ. While this survey is not exhaustive, nor intended to unequivocally establish evidence for the uniqueness of Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the Psalms, it does, nonetheless, serve a valuable role in this dissertation. Namely, it supports my claim that I will make in the following chapters that, although Bonhoeffer shares a similar Christ-focused, church-edifying approach toward the Psalms held by many premodern exegetes, and although he exhibits a similar compulsion found among many modern exegetes to explore and validate his interpretation of the Psalms by means of its relationship to a particular historical

⁸⁷ Tucker, *Form Criticism*, v. See Mowinckel, *Psalms*, 2:106–92

⁸⁸ Jerome F. D. Creach, “The Psalms and the Cult” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2005), 119.

⁸⁹ Speaking negatively of the impact of modern historical-critical study of the Bible, Linnemann, *Historical Criticism*, 95, avers: “Overwhelmed by the ‘expertise’ of theologians, the student or the person being confirmed or the church member loses all confidence of being able to personally understand God’s Word. Another loss, typically, is the joy the Christian once had in the Bible.” Bonhoeffer came to express a similar distrust of historical-critical exegetical methods (see *DBWE* 9:285–98; *DBW* 9:305–22). The topic of Bonhoeffer’s evaluation and use of historical-critical methods and assumptions will be addressed in greater depth in following chapters.

time period, there is, nonetheless, a hermeneutical decision that Bonhoeffer makes in his interpretation of the Psalms that is not present in the tradition before him. It is this decision which will start to become more visible in the next chapter as I discuss the influence of Bonhoeffer's immediate intellectual and theological context on his early interpretation of the Old Testament and of the Psalms, including how he came to distinguish his interpretation after his academic years at Berlin University and into the time of his first pastorates.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY INFLUENCES: BONHOEFFER DISTINGUISHES HIS EXEGETICAL APPROACH TOWARD THE PSALMS

The Place of the Old Testament in Early Twentieth Century Biblical Studies

A discussion of the Christological interpretation of the Psalms in the early decades of the twentieth century inevitably demands a broader examination of the scholarly reception of the whole Old Testament. It should be readily observed that, by the time of the early twentieth century, historical-critical scholarship was flourishing under the growing influence of European universities. Theological faculty in many of these institutions enthusiastically embraced presuppositions and exegetical strategies resonant with historical-criticism, and were thus a loud voice for the modern liberal perspective of biblical interpretation.¹ But growing within the scholarly guild and within the church was a cry of discontent over the prevailing tenor of academia's interpretive output. As a result there came a call to reassert a spiritual or theological interpretation of the Bible,² an approach that had been significantly excised from the historical-critical academic centers of study. These dissenting voices, however, faced a stiff headwind.

In what follows I will present the three basic opinions toward the Old Testament prevalent

¹ In addition to the prominent University of Berlin (Adolf von Harnack, Karl Seeberg, etc.), other influential European universities in the early twentieth century were University of Göttingen (Albrecht Ritschl, Heinrich Ewald, Julius Wellhausen, Georg Heinrich August Ewald, Bernhard Duhm); University of Tübingen (Ferdinand Christian Baur); University of Marburg (Rudolf Bultmann).

² An interest in theological interpretation has also been renewed in the early twenty-first century by publications such as Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009); Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005). Geoffrey B. Kelly analyzes Bonhoeffer's theological interpretation in "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theological Interpretation of Scripture for the Church," *ExAud* 17 (2001): 1–30. McLarney, *St. Augustine's Interpretation*, 4-5, proposes a definition of theological exegesis that "presumes that Scripture is fruitfully read in relation to the life and faith of the Christian Church, which centers on the figure of Jesus Christ."

at the turn of the twentieth century. As a part of these descriptions, I will name and briefly explore the contributions of active scholars who were representative of these opinions. The list of scholars included could be quite extensive, so I will focus my selection on those individuals who had, or were presumed to have, influence on Bonhoeffer and the formation of his own hermeneutic of the Scriptures.

Opinion One: The Rejection of the Old Testament

The modern era “problem” of the Christological interpretation of the Psalms is part and parcel of a question which fueled debate all the way back to the patristic era: what is the proper hermeneutic of the Old Testament for Christian theology?³ Martin Kuske identifies three prevailing interpretive camps at the turn of the twentieth century. The first consisted of those who “rejected the Old Testament because it [was] not [believed to be] a witness to the Christian religion.”⁴ Respected among this group of scholars was the renowned historian (and one of Bonhoeffer’s Berlin instructors) Adolf von Harnack (AD 1851–1930).⁵ Harnack aligned himself with the accepted presuppositions and conclusions of the *Religionsgeschichte Schule* and was himself highly critical in his evaluation of the Old Testament. His accompanying appreciation for the Psalms was minimal.⁶ Kuske writes that,

³ See Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 9–149.

⁴ Martin Kuske, *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ: An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer’s Interpretation*, trans. S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 7.

⁵ Harnack’s major works include a 3-volume *History of Dogma* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1886–1889) and his latest work, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott. Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche*, rev. ed. (Leipzig: J. C. Heinrichs, 1924). Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, “20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age” in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 51, note that Harnack was a student of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), a theologian recognized as the father of classical liberal Protestantism. According Ferdinand Schlingensiefen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 1906–1945, Martyr, Thinker, Man of Justice*, trans. Isabel Best (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 27, Harnack taught seminars on the origins and early history of the church well beyond his retirement in 1921. It was in one of these “invite only” seminars in the winter of 1924–1925 that Bonhoeffer first caught Harnack’s attention as a student who exhibited breadth of knowledge and theological acuity

⁶ Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, & Protestant Theology* (Oxford:

[i]n [von Harnack's] book on Marcion is the oft-quoted sentence, 'To reject the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake which the universal church rightly had rejected; to retain it in the sixteenth century was a fate from which the Reformation was not able to disentangle itself; but to conserve it since the nineteenth century as a canonical document in Protestantism is the result of a religious and church paralysis.'⁷

Despite his eventual departure from Harnack's view of the Old Testament, Bonhoeffer was nonetheless greatly impacted by his relationship with his instructor.

Opinion Two: The Retention of the Old Testament

The second interpretive group Kuske recognizes was one which accepted the Old Testament, but considered it "a witness to the pre-stage of Christianity."⁸ Representative of this retention community was Bonhoeffer's doctoral advisor Reinhold Seeberg (AD 1859–1935), as well as Ernst Sellin (AD 1867–1946) and Friedrich Baumgärtel (AD 1888–1981).⁹ Kuske also mentions another retention scholar named Johannes Fichtner, who spoke out against Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the imprecatory Ps 58. Fichtner opposed Bonhoeffer's particular Christological exegesis of this psalm because, in his opinion, the psalm ought to be read from an historical perspective, and thus he did not believe it exegetically or theologically proper to "insert" Jesus Christ as both the pray-er of this psalm *and* the one "prayed

Oxford University, 2012), 3–4, speaks to Bonhoeffer's relationship with Harnack: "Temperamentally, Bonhoeffer was worlds apart from Barth and Gogarten, never failing to show deference and respect to his elders. Unlike the dialectical theologians themselves, Bonhoeffer continued to sit at the feet of the old masters. Despite his omnivorous consumption of Barth's theology, Bonhoeffer dutifully attended the seminars of Berlin's theological old guard: Reinhold Seeberg, Karl Holl, and Adolf von Harnack. If, as subsequent generations of theological students have been taught, Karl Barth's second edition of *Romans* sounded the death-knell of liberal theology, then Bonhoeffer was apparently content to live at least a little while longer among the corpses." See also John T. Pless, "Wayward Students of Harnack: Hermann Sasse and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the Word of God" in *Niin Kuin Se Kirjoitettu On: Niin Se Myös Paikkansa Pitää*, ed. Sakari Korpinen, Juhana Pohjola ja Tapani Simojoki (Oy Fram Ab, Vaasa: Suomen evankelisluterilainen lähetysliittopaino ja Suomen Luther-säätiö, 2014), 139–47.

⁷ Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 9.

⁸ Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 7.

⁹ Kuske describes Baumgärtel as vehemently disagreeing with Bonhoeffer on Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Old Testament. In particular, see Kuske's record, *The Old Testament*, 82–84, of Baumgärtel's attack on Bonhoeffer's Bible study, "The Reconstruction of Jerusalem According to Ezra and Nehemiah" (*DBWE* 14:917–31; *DBW* 14:930–45).

against.”¹⁰ While Fichtner questioned this psalm’s relevance to the Christian church-community, Kuske emphasizes Bonhoeffer’s resolute contention to stand “against every attempt to diminish the Old Testament to an ‘early religious stage.’”¹¹

Opinion Three: The Acceptance of the Old Testament

Kuske finally identifies a third group of scholars from this same period who neither rejected nor hesitantly retained the Old Testament, but who fully acknowledged it as “the Word of God along with the New Testament.”¹² Notable among this cohort was Adolf Schlatter (AD 1852–1938), professor of New Testament at Tübingen University, whom Bonhoeffer studied under during the 1923–1924 academic year.¹³ Linnemann comments on Schlatter’s effectiveness as a conservative scholar in navigating the turbulent waters of his liberal historical-critical context:

Adolf Schlatter filled a gap in New Testament studies as a knowledgeable rabbinic scholar. He was therefore basically accepted [among the scholarly guild]. But what he

¹⁰ Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 93. See Johannes Fichtner, “Vom Psalmbeten. Ist das Beten aller Psalmen der christlichen Gemeinde möglich und heilsam?” in *Wort und Dienst, Jahrbuch der Theologischen Schule Bethel* (1952), 38–60.

¹¹ Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 93. This perspective held by Seeberg, Fichtner, and Baumgärtel is reminiscent of (though arguably not as extreme as) the medieval hermeneutic practiced by Hugh of Saint Victor, Peter Lombard, Bonaventura, Thomas Aquinas, Henry Totting of Oyta, Jean Gerson, James Perez of Valencia. See Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 24–122.

¹² Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 7.

¹³ Like Bonhoeffer in the years to come, Schlatter demonstrated concern beyond his academic context for the spiritual growth of the church. In doing so he sought to bring together “the most rigorous New Testament historical criticism with an equally profound commitment to the church’s faith” (Ward W. Gasque, “The Promise of Adolf Schlatter” in *With Heart, Mind & Strength: The Best of Crux, 1979–1989*, ed. Donald M. Lewis [Langley, British Columbia: CREDO, 1990], 218). As evidence of this, Robert W. Yarbrough, “Schlatter, Adolf (1852–1938)” in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 519, reports that among Schlatter’s voluminous publications is a well-received commentary series for church lay leaders which covers every book in the New Testament (see Adolf Schlatter, *Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament*, 10 vols. [Stuttgart: Calwer, 1961–1965]). Gasque, “The Promise,” 217, argues that Schlatter was one of Bonhoeffer’s earliest influences of a theological-spiritual interpretation of Scripture, a fact which, he suggests, contradicts “the sometimes North American impression of the German church as totally controlled by very liberal theology.” In many ways, Schlatter may be seen to be in his own time the type of conservative scholar-churchman that Bonhoeffer would become in the following generation.

had to say in terms of spiritual insight, for example in his commentaries on the entire New Testament, was not taken seriously, being disregarded as “unscientific.”¹⁴

In addition to his numerous writings on the New Testament and Jewish backgrounds to the New Testament, Schlatter also wrote an introduction to the Bible which includes a chapter on the Psalms.¹⁵ His comments reveal an understanding of the Psalms which reflects the literary genre categorization articulated by Gunkel,¹⁶ even while distancing itself from the common *Religionsgeschichte* assumption of the Psalter’s cultic *Sitz im Leben*. Schlatter speaks of the Psalter as originating as a collection of songs which was then edited together, its most prominent collector and composer being king David.¹⁷ He acknowledges the role many psalms had in the liturgical life of Israel, yet sees them more naturally flowing out of the personal, spiritual experiences of David or other Israelites, rather than from the pen of cultic professionals, as Mowinckel suggests.

The one scholar from within Kuske’s third interpretive group who was arguably the most influential in Bonhoeffer’s life was the Swiss Reformed theologian and pastor Karl Barth (AD 1886–1968). In addition to opposing the nineteenth century tendency to root “Christianity in human experience and [to look] upon faith as an element in the spiritual life of man,” Barth also protested “against those schools which had transmuted theology into a science of religion and had held the historicocritical analysis of the Bible to be the only possible interpretation.”¹⁸ As

¹⁴ Linnemann, *Historical Criticism*, 138.

¹⁵ Adolf von Schlatter, *Einleitung in die Bible* (Calwer: Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1889), 125–29, held that the Psalms originated in the hands of poets. They started as individual songs from personal experiences of joy and sorrow. Various leaders within Israel, foremost among them was David, gathered these writings into a collection. The Psalms, wrote Schlatter, captured the prayers, complaints, and thanksgivings of the people of Israel and let us “participate in the hidden spiritual side of Old Testament [ceremonial] worship.”

¹⁶ The subheadings used by Schlatter in his chapter on the Psalms are: The Psalms with Historical Occasion, Prayers Because of Personal Concerns, Prophetic Psalms, Teaching Psalms, Liturgical Psalms.

¹⁷ Schlatter, *Einleitung*, 123.

¹⁸ Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology*, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968), 397.

Roger E. Olson describes,

[Barth] found that liberal theology was useless in his weekly task of preaching.¹⁹ As a result, he undertook a careful and painstaking study of the Scriptures and discovered ‘The Strange New World within the Bible,’ to employ the title of one of his earliest articles. In them he found not human religion, not even the highest thoughts of pious people, but God’s word: ‘It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men.’ Barth found a relevant message for his parishioners in the transcendent Word in Scripture and not in the philosophical theology of the liberal school of neo-Protestantism in which he had been trained.²⁰

In *Der Römerbrief* (1919), Barth countered many of the core tenets of early twentieth century liberal Protestantism by insisting “on the need to return to faithful exegesis rather than systematic constructions”²¹ or natural theology.²² This call to return to the text of Scripture included in its scope *both* the Old and the New Testament, for, Barth argued, in both Testaments the “Bible ‘bears witness’ to the revelation which occurred with the coming of Christ.”²³ In *Der Römerbrief* and *Kirchliche Dogmatik*,²⁴ two of Barth’s major works, he makes ample use of the Psalter,

¹⁹ William Willimon, *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth: Fourteen Sermons with Commentary by William H. Willimon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), xii–xiii, credits much of Barth’s growth and theological insights to his weekly preaching duties: “Though he was depressed that preaching ‘gets more difficult for me all the time,’ Barth discovered that it was this impossibility of preaching that was the true theme of theology.... I believe that Barth made his great theological discoveries ... as gifts of the weekly demand to go to the Bible and then to come up with a sermon.... A preacher, unlike an academic theologian, cannot forever postpone a verdict, cannot avoid a weekly, public declaration of God. A preacher must preach even if the preacher feels (as Barth felt) that it is impossible for him to preach.” The vocation of pastor unites many of the scholars Bonhoeffer found agreement with in his view of Scripture, including Schlatter Barth, and Vischer.

²⁰ Roger E. Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 302. This description is consistent with Bonhoeffer’s own experience and subsequent divergence from historical-critical methods, as highlighted by Geoffrey B. Kelly in the introduction to *Prayerbook* (see *DBWE* 5:143–45).

²¹ Gonzalez, *The Story*, 2:362.

²² Hägglund, *History*, 403

²³ Hägglund, *History*, 401.

²⁴ Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 4 vols. (Munich, 1932–1967; trans. as *Church Dogmatics*. 4 vols., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1977).

regularly citing and quoting from it in a way that recognizes the consistency of its teaching and of its witness in light of the New Testament and Christian doctrine.²⁵

In addition to Barth, Kuske also highlights others in this third interpretive group. He mentions Wilhelm Vischer and, in specific, his *Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments* (1934), which sounded an “alarm throughout theological science,”²⁶ much like Barth’s *Römerbrief* did fifteen years earlier. Stefan Felber’s research on Vischer clearly depicts the battle Vischer faced in the defense of his conviction that “Jesus Christ is the Word of God, and if Jesus is not the living Word in the texts of the Old Testament, then these books of Holy Scripture do not contain the Word of God.”²⁷ In response to charges of excessive allegorization leveled against Vischer’s interpretative work, Felber describes the efforts Vischer made to refute those claims while also shedding light on what he viewed as modern biblical interpretation’s “false allegorizing: it first construes a ‘historical’ meaning and then makes out of it a ‘moral’ truth.”²⁸

Worthy of mention in this third group is an additional list of scholars with whom Kuske

²⁵ Barth’s use of the Psalter in *Der Römerbrief* mirrors the Apostle Paul’s use in Romans. He does not explicitly defend the Christological witness of the Psalter but does, by his use, implicitly endorse its uniformity with the NT’s teachings. As demonstrated by his treatment of Ps 32 in Rom 4:6–8 (126), Barth’s typological view of the Psalms allows for freedom when determining the historical accuracy of the Psalter’s authorial assertions: “What is true of Abraham is therefore true also of the *anonymous figure portrayed in the 32nd Psalm*. Both are witnesses of the Resurrection, and both live by it. As independent historical figures apart from Christ, they are incompressible. They are types of the life of His which is prolonged longitudinally throughout the whole extent of time” (emphasis added).

²⁶ Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 16

²⁷ Stefan Felber, *Wilhelm Vischer als Ausleger der Heiligen Schrift. Eine Untersuchung zum Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments* in *Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie* 89. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 34.

²⁸ Felber, *Wilhelm Vischer*, 211. Vischer worked alongside Bonhoeffer on the Bethel Confession of 1933 (see Carsten Nicolaisen, “Concerning the History of the Bethel Confession” in *DBWE* 12:509–13; *DBW* 12:503–07) and shared numerous exegetical and political points-of-view on such topics as the interpretation of Genesis (see *DBWE* 3:157–58; *DBW* 3:147–48; cf. Wilhelm Vischer, “Das Alte Testament als Gottes Wort,” *Zwischen den Zeiten*, no. 5 [1927]: 380–95), the relationship of Jesus Christ to the Old Testament (see Wilhelm Vischer, “Everywhere the Scripture Is about Christ Alone,” in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith: A Theological Discussion*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson [New York: Harper & Row, 1963], 90–101), and his stance against the German Christians and anti-Semitism (see Vischer, “Zur Judenfrage: Eine kurze biblische Erörterung der Judenfrage im Anschluss an die Leitsätze eines Vortrages über die Bedeutung des Alten Testaments,” *Pastoraltheologie* 29 [1933]: 185–90).

aligns Bonhoeffer's appraisal of the Old Testament: Hans Walter Wolff (AD 1911–1993),²⁹ Walther Zimmerli (AD 1907–1983),³⁰ Alfred Jepsen (AD 1900–1979),³¹ and Gerhard von Rad (AD 1901–1971).³² According to Kuske, the exegetical method these scholars employed involved a “double direction movement”—reading the Old Testament in light of the New Testament *and* reading the New Testament in light of the Old Testament.³³ Although this “bidirectional” approach certainly stood in stark contrast with the “rejection” and “retention” groups mentioned above, it should not, however, be understood simply as a return to a fully premodern, pre-critical exegesis. Most of the scholars in this third interpretative group had been educated in thoroughly modern, historical-critical universities which countered many of the traditional exegetical judgments regarding authorship, dating, unity, and the historical and religious uniqueness of the biblical books and content. Yet, like Bonhoeffer, these scholars recognized an inherent weakness in many of the historical-critical presuppositions and methods, weaknesses which prevented them from making the Old Testament applicable and beneficial to the church. As Brevard Childs would later write, “the theological implications of Gunkel's methodology were seen by many scholars, and one of the characteristic features of biblical scholarship” in the decades that followed Gunkel was the effort “to bridge the gap between critical exegesis and the actual faith of the church.”³⁴

²⁹ See Hans Walter Wolff, “Der grosse Jesreeltag (Hos 2:1–3),” *EvTh* 12 (1952/53): 1021; “Hauptprobleme alttestamentlicher Prophetie,” *EvTh* 15 (1955): 468; “Zur Hermeneutik des Alten Testaments,” *EvTh* 16 (1956): 361. Wolff is not quoted or cited in Bonhoeffer's collected works.

³⁰ See Walther Zimmerli, “Verheissung und Erfüllung,” *EvTh* 12 (1952/53): 54. Zimmerli is not quoted or cited in Bonhoeffer's collected works.

³¹ See Alfred Jepsen, “Wissenschaft vom Alten Testament,” *PAH* 241. Jepsen is not quoted or cited in Bonhoeffer's collected works.

³² See Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 2, (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1960), 387, 400. Von Rad is not quoted or cited in Bonhoeffer's collected works.

³³ Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 34.

³⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 510–11.

Conclusion

This look at the hermeneutical opinions toward the Old Testament prevalent in first few decades of the twentieth century has demonstrated an overwhelming adherence among leading exegetes and biblical scholars of this time to the presuppositions and strategies of the historical-critical method. This hermeneutic continued to challenge many traditional interpretive conclusions, particularly those which relied on the accuracy of the Bible's historical data. Nineteenth century interpretation of the Psalms, which had been heavily focused on the psalmist's existential and spiritual struggle, was dramatically redefined by the work of Hermann Gunkel and his student Sigmund Mowinckel, who analyzed the Psalms more heavily in light of their literary forms and (proposed) cultic *Sitz im Leben*. The work of these two scholars informed and fueled future scholarship for decades to come.

Yet there persisted among some a sense of discontent with the "assured results" of the modern methods of scientific, historical, and literary exegesis. Taking his place within this minority, yet determined, group of scholar-pastors was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who like Schlatter, Barth, and Vischer came to a conviction that the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, was to be accepted as the Word of God and, as such, witnessed to God's work of salvation through Jesus Christ. It is this foundational conviction which fueled Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Old Testament. It is also what prompted him to go one step further in his interpretation of the Old Testament, by not only drawing a connection between Christ, the Old Testament, and the New Testament, but also by looking for Christ *in* the Old Testament. As Kuske argues, this perspective "has no equivalent in that which [Wolff, Zimmerli, Jepsen, or von Rad] require for an interpretation of the Bible."³⁵ It is with this framework in place that we are

³⁵ Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 34. Kuske, 60-96, then proceeds to demonstrate this unique characteristic of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Old Testament through an analysis of Bonhoeffer's lecture, "Christus in den

now able to take a deeper look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer's hermeneutical approach toward the Psalms and, in particular, the beginning stages of his Christological exegesis of the Psalms and understanding of them as the prayerbook of Christ and of the church.

Bonhoeffer's Early Exegetical Treatment of the Psalms

Having considered the basic characteristics and methods of premodern and modern interpretation of the Psalter, along with a representative look at attempts of early twentieth century scholars to address the problems modern scholars had with a Christological interpretation of the Psalms, I will now explore the path Dietrich Bonhoeffer took in differentiating himself from both modern historical-critical scholars and from other contemporaries who shared his basic view of the Old Testament. I will do so in three parts. First, I will briefly describe the intellectual and theological context in which Bonhoeffer received his academic training. This was a context thoroughly saturated by the modern historical-critical presuppositions and methods, a fact which is reflected in his early interpretive work in the Psalms. I will then identify turning points in Bonhoeffer's intellectual and theological thought which brought about a shift in his interpretation of the Scriptures. Evidence for this shift will be provided from Bonhoeffer's own academic writing, personal correspondence, and homiletical writing.

Bonhoeffer's Early Intellectual and Theological Influences

Bonhoeffer began his academic training in the fall of 1923 at the University of Tübingen where he first came in contact with the aforementioned New Testament scholar Adolf Schlatter.

Psalmen" (Jul 31, 1935), his Bible studies, "King David" (Oct 8–11, 1935) and "The Reconstruction of Jerusalem According to Ezra and Nehemiah" (Apr 21, 1936), and his sermon on Ps 58 (Jul 11, 1937).

After completing this first year,³⁶ Bonhoeffer then left Tübingen to continue his studies at the University of Berlin. Here he studied under such renowned scholars as Adolf von Harnack,³⁷ Karl Holl (AD 1866–1926),³⁸ and his eventual *Doktorvater*, Reinhold Seeberg (AD 1859–1935).³⁹ These years of Bonhoeffer’s early development show only limited interaction with the Psalms. The examples which offer the most clear and sustained treatment are found in two homilies, the first from Ps 127:1 and the second from Ps 62:2.⁴⁰ As will be demonstrated, these

³⁶ In between the time of Bonhoeffer’s studies at Tübingen and Berlin, he took a trip with his brother, Klaus, to Rome which lasted from April–June 1924. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, trans. Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel, ed. Edwin Robertson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 56–65, contributes this trip with starting Bonhoeffer on the path toward his first dissertation on the church, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (DBWE/DBW 1). He writes, 65: “It is no exaggeration to state that the origins of the theological themes of his early period can be discerned in his Roman experience. While the Barthians and their master, in their early period, concentrated on the theme of revelation and viewed other articles of theology in relation to it, Bonhoeffer’s attention was soon completely absorbed by the phenomenon of the church.... His journey to Rome essentially helped him to articulate the theme of ‘the church.’”

³⁷ As a church historian on the faculty of Berlin University, Harnack taught seminars on the origins and early history of the church well beyond his retirement in 1921. It was in one of these “invite only” seminars in the winter of 1924–1925 that Bonhoeffer first caught Harnack’s attention as a student who exhibited breadth of knowledge and theological acuity. As Hans-Martin Rumscheit, “Harnack, Adolf von (1851–1930)” in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 493, notes, “Although Harnack imprinted upon Bonhoeffer ‘superb text-critical skills and knowledge of detail,’ along with a high value for historical and critical thinking, Harnack’s formative impression on Bonhoeffer did not carry over to Bonhoeffer’s view of Scripture nor of the Psalms. See John T. Pless, “Wayward Students of Harnack: Hermann Sasse and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the Word of God” in *Niin kuin se kirjoitettu on: niin se myös paikkansa pitää* (*It is true as it is written*), *Anssi Simonjoen 70-vuotisjuhlakirja*, eds. Sakari Korpinen, Juhana Pohjola, and Tapani Simojoki (Vaasa, Finland: Suomen evankelisluterilainen lähetysliikunta ja Suomen Luther-säätiö, 2014), 139–47.

³⁸ Holl’s theology and teaching on Luther was of significance in Bonhoeffer’s *Habilitationsschrift*, *Act and Being*, in which Bonhoeffer charts a course distinct from both Holl’s conscience-centered concept of revelation and Barth’s action-centered view of revelation. Bonhoeffer’s argument in this dissertation is for a traditionally-held Lutheran view of a person-centered concept of revelation. For a more in-depth treatment of Bonhoeffer’s *Act and Being*, see Michael de Jonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, & Protestant Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); see also Franklin Sherman, “The Methods of Asking the Question Concerning Jesus Christ: *Act and Being*” in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Essays on the Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. Martin E. Marty (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1962).

³⁹ Reinhold Seeberg taught systematic theology at Berlin University and was Bonhoeffer’s advisor for his dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* (DBWE 1: DBW 1). Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 57–58 states that although Bonhoeffer did not fully agree with all of Seeberg’s theological conclusions, he saw in Seeberg an instructor who could guide him in a manner which would allow him the freedom to develop his own judgments and convictions.

⁴⁰ A third sermon which will also be discussed later in this section is based on Ps 98:1 (DBWE 13:353–57; DBW 13:351–56). It was delivered on April 29, 1934. This sermon will be used as an example of a transitional stage in Bonhoeffer’s exegesis of the Psalms—between the time of his pastorate in London and his leading the Confessing

two sermons reveal the significant influence that Berlin’s historical-critical approach had on a young Bonhoeffer.

Sermon on Psalm 127:1

On May 20, 1926 Bonhoeffer preached his first recorded sermon on the Psalms, which was prepared for a Berlin University preaching seminar and was based on Ps 127:1.⁴¹ The text for this sermon reads, “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.” The sermon focuses heavily on an application to the current cultural and political rebuilding of post-World War I Germany.⁴² Emphasis in the sermon is given to the phrases “unless *the LORD* builds” and “those who build it labor *in vain*.”⁴³

What is initially noticed in this sermon, particularly when compared to what Bonhoeffer would write ten years later, is that he only engages one verse of the Psalm. Additionally, his interpretive accent is on the text as an historical document which happens to have contemporary religious relevance for those who desire to engage in the work of rebuilding Germany with success and permanence. Building for earthly gain and with human wisdom is likened to the tower of Babel, which stood as a strong structure but was nonetheless a stalwart symbol of vanity. Strikingly, there is only one mention of Jesus Christ (in the last line of the manuscript of this sermon) and no application to the church’s prayer life—two characteristics prominent in his

Church seminary in Finkenwalde.

⁴¹ *DBWE* 9:470–75; *DBW* 9:510–16.

⁴² See Karl Barth’s sermon on Ps 23 in Karl Barth and William H. Willimon, *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth: Fourteen Sermons with Commentary by William H. Willimon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 89–98, for an example of a similar homiletical treatment of a Psalm text which emphasizes its application to post-World War I restoration.

⁴³ *DBWE* 9:472; *DBW* 9:512. Emphasis original. In his exposition of the meaning of these phrases Bonhoeffer (*DBWE* 9:472–73; *DBW* 9:513) explains, “But if we try serious to do what God wants and not what we want, then it is the same thing as if God is doing the building. How else can the Lord build except through us? Therefore, our building is in vain only when we don’t build with our whole heart in accordance with God’s will!”

more mature interpretation of the Psalms. Instead, the psalm verse is used rather enigmatically to critique the rebuilding of a society apart from “the light of God’s magnificence” and “in vain for eternity, in vain in God’s eyes.”⁴⁴

Sermon on Psalm 62:2

Two years later, while serving as an associate pastor in a German-speaking congregation in Barcelona, Bonhoeffer preached a sermon on Ps 62:2.⁴⁵ As with his student sermon on Ps 127:1, Bonhoeffer deals only with a single verse in this homily. In doing so, he gives priority to the text’s supposed *Sitz im Leben*.⁴⁶ The thrust of Bonhoeffer’s exegetical analysis of this psalm is on its call to silence before God. Bonhoeffer describes, in somewhat mystical terms, what it means to be silent in God’s presence:

None of us is so rushed that we cannot find ten minutes a day during the morning or evening to be silent, to focus on eternity alone, allow eternity to speak, to query it concerning ourselves,⁴⁷ and in the process look deeply into ourselves and far beyond ourselves, either by reading a couple of biblical passages or, even better, by becoming completely free and allowing our soul to travel to the house of the Father, to the home in which it finds peace. And those who seriously apply themselves to such exercise day after day will amply experience the golden abundance of the fruit such hours yield.⁴⁸

Evident in this quote is a seminal form of Bonhoeffer’s thoughts regarding the practice and benefit of silent meditation.⁴⁹ Yet what is conspicuously absent, especially when compared to

⁴⁴ *DBWE* 9:474; *DBW* 9:515. *DBWE* 9:470n 1 includes the following approval of this sermon, handwritten by Prof. Dr. Mahling: “This sermon can be preached to a congregation.” According to that footnote, “A written note by an ordained theologian was required if someone who had not yet passed his or her theological examinations wanted to preach to a congregation.”

⁴⁵ *DBWE* 10:500–5; *DBW* 10:479–85. This sermon was delivered on July 15, 1928.

⁴⁶ *DBWE* 10:500; *DBW* 10:479. Given his creative exegesis of the psalmist’s historical context, it should be noted that nowhere in this sermon does Bonhoeffer acknowledge this psalm’s Davidic superscription.

⁴⁷ What Bonhoeffer describes here as a query of “eternity” is later changed to speak of a query of God and his Word, the Bible (*DBWE* 14:167; *DBW* 14:144-45).

⁴⁸ *DBWE* 10:504; *DBW* 10:484.

⁴⁹ More will be said below about Bonhoeffer’s personal and corporate practice of Scripture meditation and prayer.

what he will write in *Life Together* (1939), is the centrality of the Scriptures in this practice of meditation. In fact, much of Bonhoeffer's analysis of the nature and resistance to silence (and, in specific, silence *before God*) lacks any consultation with Scripture. At this early stage, his understanding of the problem is psychological and religious, more than it is theological.⁵⁰ As evidence of this fact, Bonhoeffer's sermon on Ps 62:2 contains no mention of Jesus or of the cross.

Bonhoeffer Distinguishes His Own Exegetical Approach

The two sermons just referenced give evidence of the impact of Berlin's theological faculty on Bonhoeffer's early hermeneutical approach to the Psalms. Yet despite this strong influence, Bonhoeffer would not continue in this trajectory. Sometime during the winter of 1924–1925 Bonhoeffer became acquainted with the writings of Karl Barth, an event which arguably moved him most decidedly away from the liberal Protestantism of his Berlin professors.⁵¹ Having been convinced and impassioned by Barth's teaching—a fact which concerned his Berlin teachers, especially Harnack—Bonhoeffer could have easily left Berlin to study under Barth at the University of Göttingen. Instead, he stayed on at Berlin, eventually charting his own course

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer argues in this sermon (*DBWE* 10:503; *DBW* 10:483) that there “are two simple reasons [we don't seek silence before God]. First, we are afraid of silence. We are so accustomed to commotion and noise that we are uncomfortable amid silence; ... The other [reason] is that we are too lethargic and lazy in our religious lives.” In a children's message from Nov 29, 1926, presumably based on Ps 24:7, Bonhoeffer gives a similarly mystical and “Scripture-less” description of meditation: “We must truly try to open the door when we are alone by ourselves. It doesn't happen just by talking about it. Certainly the door is often rusted shut and difficult to open, but we have to try. First, we have to silence all the voices in us that wish to speak about school, our friends, about the games, and the boy we just fought. It must become very still within us, and when it has become very still we can call out to the one who hopes to come to us” (*DBWE* 9:512; *DBW* 9:563).

⁵¹ Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theological Interpretation of Scripture for the Church,” *ExAud* 17 (2001): 1, explain how Bonhoeffer's attempts to motivate the church to obey the actual teaching of Scripture moved him “to derive a spiritual, pastoral meaning from the scriptural word, an approach more dependent on faith in the teaching power of the Holy Spirit than in the less soul-nurturing rules of historical criticism.” Barth's influence on Bonhoeffer in this regard is unmistakable. Not to be overlooked, however, in the list of influences on Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms are his early experiences in pastoral ministry, his studies at Union Theological Seminary, and his involvement in the Continental ecumenical movement. These were all important to the formation of Bonhoeffer's theology, ministry, and view of Scripture, and will be given more consideration within the full dissertation.

between Barth's theology of revelation and Berlin's strong emphasis on historical criticism.⁵²

One of Bonhoeffer's early breaking points from historical-criticism's methods and presuppositions came with the writing was his essay, "Can One Distinguish between a Historical and a Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture, and How Does Dogmatics Relate to This Question?"⁵³ While not completely dismissing the benefits of an historical analysis of Scripture,⁵⁴ "Bonhoeffer began [this essay] by condemning the skill in which he had just distinguished himself under Harnack and Holl. Textual criticism, he wrote, left nothing behind but 'rubble and fragments.' The texts are not just historical sources, but agents of revelation, not just specimens of writing, but sacred canon."⁵⁵ It was in his first dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* (1927), that he furthered this rift by seemingly adopting more fully a Barthian view of Scripture. As Michael P. DeJonge observes: "By the time of his doctoral dissertation in 1927 ... Bonhoeffer began 'to discover his way on his own,' attempting to bring the critical tradition in harmony with the theology of revelation."⁵⁶

⁵² This decision to continue his studies at Berlin appears consistent with Bonhoeffer's pattern to place himself near enough to others so as to benefit from their insights and expertise, yet not so close as to be swallowed up in their intellectual vortex. Bosanquet, *Bonhoeffer*, 57: "Eberhard Bethge has remarked Bonhoeffer's unwillingness at any time in his life to give himself up to a mind so great that it might have overshadowed his own, casting him in its own mould [sic], and perhaps robbing him of the freedom and independence of judgement which were for him the very stuff of life."

⁵³ *DBWE* 9:285–300; *DBW* 9:305–23. Dated July 31, 1925. The critical notes in *DBWE* 9 record Seeberg's less-than-enthusiastic reception of Bonhoeffer's "Barthian" position. While still affirming in this paper the use of some methods of historical-criticism to clarify, for example, historical context, textual difficulties, or literary genre, Bonhoeffer warns against "applying humanly introduced means external to scripture" as a controlling framework for interpreting the text.

⁵⁴ This fact is evidenced by some of Bonhoeffer's catechetical and homiletical writings from this era (see Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 90. The record of his writings from this period demonstrates that he first took in and mastered the tools of his Berlin instructors before starting to express some concern about the usefulness of historical criticism's methods for the purpose of understanding the Bible as "Word of God." As he wrote in this essay, *DBWE* 9:285; *DBW* 9:306: "Christian religion stands or falls with the belief in a historical and perceptive real divine revelation, a revelation that those who have eyes to see can see and those who have ears to hear can hear. Consequently, in its innermost nature, it raises the question we take up here, namely, the relationship of history and the Spirit."

⁵⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 79.

⁵⁶ DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation*, 4.

In spite of this relatively clear evidence, identifying the exact *Durchbruch* in Bonhoeffer's intellectual development that opened up for him this distinct path of interpreting the Scriptures is not an easy task.⁵⁷ Inevitably, the search focuses not just on one singular event, but on a series of events which confronted, challenged, informed, and finally supported Bonhoeffer's convictions thoroughly enough for him to have the courage to stand his ground in the face of the differing views held by his immediate peers and current teachers—not to mention the Nazi detractors who would soon seek his arrest on account of his particular reading of the Old Testament.

That being said, several of Bonhoeffer's biographers have made notice of one particular epiphany in Bonhoeffer's thinking which presented itself around the time of his 1932–1933 *Schöpfung und Fall* lectures.⁵⁸ It was then that Bonhoeffer experienced what he later termed a “conversion.”⁵⁹ He described this experience as a coming “to the Bible” and as something that “changed and transformed” his life.⁶⁰ He gave testimony of this “conversion experience”⁶¹ in a letter he wrote to his brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher on April 8, 1936:

Let me first admit quite simply: I believe that the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we merely need ask perpetually and with a bit of humility in order to get the answer from it. One cannot simply *read* the Bible like other books. One

⁵⁷ This identification is as difficult, it seems, as isolating that same event in the life of Martin Luther. See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 203.

⁵⁸ *DBWE* 3; *DBW* 3. These well-attended lectures were presented at Berlin University and were subtitled, “A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3.”

⁵⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 202–6, offers an extensive discussion of this topic. Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt, “Editor's Afterword to the German Edition” of *Schöpfung und Fall* (*DBWE* 3:147; *DBW* 3:137), state: “Between the planning and the delivery of this course of [the *Schöpfung und Fall*] lectures, Bonhoeffer's life took a turn. After this turn the theological findings to which Bonhoeffer came, including those that he was able to relate to work he had done previously, appear in a new light.”

⁶⁰ *DBWE* 14:134; *DBW* 14:113: “I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, had spoken and written about it—and yet I was not yet a Christian but rather in an utterly wild and uncontrolled fashion my own master.... The Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from all this. Since then everything has changed.”

⁶¹ In Bethge's description, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 202, of this experience in Bonhoeffer's life, he titles the section, *The Theologian Becomes a Christian*. About this event, however, Barker and Bocker (*DBWE* 14:134n 2) caution that we ought not take Bonhoeffer's words literally here: “It does not seem appropriate to speak of an explicit ‘conversion.’”

must be prepared genuinely to query it.... Of course, one can *also* read the Bible just as one does any other book, for example, from the perspective of textual criticism, etc. There can be no objections to such reading. It merely is not the use that genuinely discloses the essence of the Bible; it discloses merely its surface.... Can you then somehow also understand that I am more willing to engage in a *sacrificium intellectus*—precisely in these things, and only in these things, that is, in view of the true God!? And anyway, who does not engage in such *sacrificium intellectus* at one point or other??—that is, that I am willing to grant that this or that passage of Scripture cannot yet be understood, though with the certainty that one day this passage will indeed be revealed as God’s own word, and that I would prefer to take this position rather than to say at my own discretion: This is divine, while that is human!? And now I really would also like to say to you personally, that since having learned to read the Bible in this way—and it has not been at all that long—it becomes more miraculous to me each day.⁶²

This move may be understood as a return, of sorts, to a pre-critical interpretive position, one characterized by humility and submissiveness toward both the authority of the text and its divine author. This approach did not intend to inhibit one’s inquisitive spirit, but placed the research and methods employed within the framework of faith and humble acceptance of the Bible, not suspicion of it. This move led Bonhoeffer to preference two new hermeneutical convictions in his exposition of Scripture. The first was preference for a theological interpretation of the Bible which he believed revered it as the Word of God and allowed it to communicate more beneficially to the church.⁶³ The second was a belief that the person and work of Jesus Christ was at the center of the Bible’s message, and consequently served to inform the interpretation of every text.⁶⁴

⁶² *DBWE* 14:167, 169; *DBW* 14:144–45, 147. Emphasis original.

⁶³ In 1980, David C. Steinmetz wrote an article issuing a call for a return to “pre-critical exegesis” (“The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37, no. 1 (Apr 1980): 27–38). In 2003, Daniel J. Treier offered an assessment and nuanced endorsement of Steinmetz’s article, setting forth his argument for the theological interpretation of Scripture. See also Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

⁶⁴ Evidence of this Christological emphasis is readily observed in the opening paragraphs of Bonhoeffer’s *Schöpfung und Fall* lectures on Genesis 1–3 in which he states (*DBWE* 3:22; *DBW* 3:22): “The Bible is after all nothing other than the book of the church. It *is* this in its very essence, or it is nothing. It therefore needs to be read and proclaimed wholly from the viewpoint of the end. In the church, therefore, the story of creation must be read in a way that begins with Christ and only then moves on toward him as its goal; indeed one can read it as a book that moves toward Christ only when one knows that Christ is the beginning, the new, the end of our whole world.”

Sermon on Psalm 98:1

Bonhoeffer's shift in hermeneutical approach during this period is hinted at in a sermon he gave to his German-speaking congregations in London on April 29, 1934. His sermon text was Ps 98:1.⁶⁵ Even though he chooses to preach again on a just a single verse of the psalm, he, nonetheless, demonstrates a perceptible hermeneutical shift that results in less concern for recreating the psalm's *Sitz im Leben* and more for the psalm's theological and Christological meaning. His opening statement is, "Today, on Cantate Sunday, let us speak about how we can praise our God through song and music. The God of Jesus Christ and how this God is worshipped by God's congregation here in music—let's talk about that."⁶⁶ In his exhortation to embrace God's gift of music and beauty in worship with excellence and holy reverence, Bonhoeffer continues to place Jesus Christ as the psalm's musical focus:

O sing to the Lord a new song—and yet all our songs are only a reflection of the song of songs, which sings of eternity before the throne of Jesus Christ or, like the images in the Bible, speaks of the shouts of joy—'Holy!' and 'Hallelujah!'—from the angels in heaven and all the saints to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."⁶⁷

Conclusion

As Bonhoeffer reached the end of the seminal years of his education, theological training, and early pastoral work, and as he prepared to cross the threshold into an era of increased ecumenical and pastoral labor, his more mature interpretation of the Old Testament and of the Psalms was taking shape. This hermeneutic, though merely nascent in the late 1920's and early 1930's can, by the end of 1934, start to be more clearly identified as theological and Christological. In a matter of months, these characteristics would be given increased emphasis

Emphasis original.

⁶⁵ *DBWE* 13:353–57; *DBW* 13:351–56.

⁶⁶ *DBWE* 13:353; *DBW* 13:351.

⁶⁷ *DBWE* 13:357; *DBW* 13:356.

and clarity. As Bonhoeffer came to shed what he deemed as some of the less-than-helpful methods of historical-criticism imparted to him by his Berlin instructors, he would soon demonstrate heightened confidence, precision, and uniqueness in the way he understood and interpreted the “Bible [as] the book of the church (the church under the cross), witnessing to one God, who in Jesus Christ loves the world.”⁶⁸

This development, and the experiences which helped to fuel it, would bring about a marked evolution in Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the Psalms as well. Very rarely would he again exposit just one verse of a psalm. Very rarely would he again draw out a psalm’s meaning based primarily on its original historical context. Rather, as noted in my comments above on Bonhoeffer’s sermon on Ps 98:1, the person of Jesus Christ was starting to take on a more prominent role in his interpretation. When combined with the hermeneutical value he placed on the Bible’s historical situated-ness—a contribution surely imparted to him from his theological training at the university—his interpretive approach evolved into one which emphasized not the original psalmist’s *Sitz im Leben* but the historical context of Jesus in his incarnation. This, in turn, prompted Bonhoeffer toward a theological reading of the Psalms that situated Jesus Christ the crucified not only as the Psalter’s subject, but as its main speaker, praying the prayers of the Psalms for himself and for his church in his incarnation and, now, in his eternal intercession. It is this form of theological, historical, Christological reading of the Psalms which proved to be for Bonhoeffer a more intellectually satisfying and spiritually encouraging approach.

As Bonhoeffer progressed into and through this era of leadership in the Confessing Church (1935–1943), the Psalms would become for him a budding source of spiritual, theological, and personal insight, instruction, and comfort. It is during these years that the Psalms’ function as the

⁶⁸ S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., introduction to Martin Kuske, *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ: An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer Interpretation*, trans. S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), xvii.

prayerbook of Christ most significantly shaped his understanding and use of them as the basis of his own prayers. As he became more convinced that the Psalms were the prayerbook of Jesus Christ, they were then able to take on their intended role as the prayerbook of the church.

CHAPTER THREE

AN EXAMINATION OF BONHOEFFER'S MATURE CHRISTOLOGICAL EXEGESIS OF THE PSALMS FROM THE PERIOD OF HIS LEADERSHIP IN THE CONFESSING CHURCH BETWEEN 1935–1940

Introduction: A Brief Review of the Christological Exegetical Approaches toward the Psalms

As has been demonstrated above, a Christological interpretation of the Psalms—broadly assumed in the premodern era yet increasingly problematic in the modern era—has been founded upon various exegetical and theological criteria. Some have approached a Christological interpretation of the Psalms by emphasizing their *prophetic* element, as words which issue forth from the mouth of David, who is himself identified as a prophet (Acts 2:30) and who speaks in them about events fulfilled in Jesus Christ (e.g., Ps 22:16–18). The New Testament shows how the early church viewed events surrounding Jesus' life, suffering, death, and resurrection through the lens of the Psalms and how the Psalms served as a validation of these events within God's plan of salvation through Christ (e.g., Acts 2:25–28; 4:25–26). Some employed *typology* to their reading of the Psalms, identifying both historical realities (e.g., events, persons, institutions, places, etc.) and abstract concepts (e.g., peace, justice, mercy, love, etc.) as *types* of Jesus Christ, who alone gives each of them their full meaning on the basis of his perfect life, atoning death, and miraculous resurrection. *Allegorical* or figurative Christological readings of the Psalms aided some exegetes to look beyond the ancient literal-historical events and context of the Psalms in order to seek an edifying application of them for the faith-experience of the contemporary Christian. With this approach, the psalm as originally written is explicated for what it “actually” (or spiritually) means in light of the New Testament and the work of Jesus Christ. And still

others employed *prosopological* exegetical approaches, aided (wittingly or unwittingly) by Augustine's doctrine of *totus Christus*, to serve their Christological interpretation of the Psalms, thus allowing any and every word of the Psalter to be heard in the voice of Christ—whether as Christ speaking in his own name or in the name of the Church.

Situating Bonhoeffer's Christological Exegesis of the Psalms within the History of Exegesis

As valid as these exegetical approaches might be for establishing a Christological interpretation of the Psalms, Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not primarily rely on any of them for his own interpretation.¹ Rather, what Bonhoeffer came to employ in his Christological exegesis of the Psalms was a unique emphasis on the historical reality of Jesus's own use of the Psalms in his incarnation. Jesus prayed the Psalms in his incarnation thereby making them his own prayerbook.² Bonhoeffer writes in his introduction to *Prayerbook*, "Jesus Christ has brought before God every need, every joy, every thanksgiving, and every hope of humankind."³ Jesus did so by means of the Psalter. Through his praying of the Psalms, Jesus infuses them with meaning that is anchored in the historical events of his own life, suffering, death, and resurrection. While,

¹ This is not to say that Bonhoeffer did not ever utilize some (or some aspects) of these methods in his own interpretation of the Psalms. As is noted in the final chapter of this dissertation, Bonhoeffer did at many times, employ interpretive strategies which drew from the typological, prophetic, and/or prosopological exegetical approaches described above. Like many exegetes, Bonhoeffer made use of varied exegetical approaches, sometimes out of need or choice, and other times out of habit.

² Bonhoeffer based this conviction on the Gospel evidence of Jesus' praying the Psalms (e.g., Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34; Luke 23:46). In *Life Together* (DBWE 5:54–55; DBW 5:39) he writes: "The *human* Jesus Christ to whom no affliction, no illness, no suffering is unknown, and who yet was the wholly innocent and righteous one, is praying in the Psalter through the mouth of his congregation. The Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word. He prayed the Psalter, and now it has become his prayer for all time" (emphasis original). Bonhoeffer was also highly influenced by the writing of Friedrich Christoph Öttinger (1702–1782) who argued that the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer, by which Jesus taught his disciples to pray, was based on the content of the Psalter. See Öttinger, *Die Psalmen Davids*, trans. Erich Beyreuther (Stuttgart: J.F. Steinkoph, 1977). On this, Bonhoeffer (DBWE 5:58; DBW 5:42–43) writes: "Öttinger, in his exegesis of the Psalms, brought out a profound truth when he arranged the whole Psalter according to the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer. What he meant was that the long and extensive book of Psalms was concerned with nothing more or less than the brief petitions of the Lord's Prayer." See also Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr, "Editors' Afterword to the German Edition" of *Prayerbook*, DBWE 5:181; DBW 5:175.

³ DBWE 5:157; DBW 5:108.

at first glance, this exegetical approach may appear to be nothing other than a form of typological interpretation, on closer examination—particularly in regard to the place given to the prayers of Jesus Christ in his incarnation—one will observe how it is, in certain ways, distinct from what is traditionally understood as a typological approach.

Traditional typological interpretation of the Old Testament is rooted in the reality of actual Old Testament persons, events, and institutions. It observes in these actual historical realities certain characteristics which are demonstrated most fully (and, indeed, are *fulfilled*) in Jesus Christ. The original historical reality serves as the “control,” per se, of the interpretation, for the *antitype* (fulfillment) cannot be of a distinct essence from the original *type*.⁴ The *telos* of Old Testament typological interpretation as traditionally practiced is Jesus Christ, the One who—as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews goes to such great lengths to clarify typologically—is the *perfect* High Priest (Heb 5:1–10), a Priest *forever* (Heb 7:21), *the* spotless Lamb (Heb 9:13–14), and *the* Mediator of a *better* covenant (Heb 8:6).⁵ Each of these examples points to Jesus Christ and his work of salvation as a “greater” and “better” realization of the Old Testament reality.

Bonhoeffer’s Christological interpretation of the Psalms, while sharing a similar emphasis on “the integral, internal connections”⁶ between two entities, is distinct from the typological

⁴ Horace D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh: An Introduction to the Origin, Purpose, and Meaning of the Old Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979), 17: “Typology, as we understand it, implies much more than mere correspondence, analogy, or symbol.... The external history (or elements) must be real enough, but ‘in, with, and under’ it lies the ultimate meaning. There is an integral, internal connection between type and antitype.”

⁵ Two important works on the topic of typology are Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical Typos Structures* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981). See also Horace D. Hummel, “The Old Testament Basis of Typological Interpretation,” *BR* 9 (1964): 38–50. Karl-Heinz Ostymeyer offers another perspective on this topic in *Taufe und Typos: Elemente und Theologie der Tauftypologien in 1. Korinther 10 und 1. Petrus 3* (Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 2000). Although recent treatment of this subject has sought to expand its definition (see, e.g., Warren Austin Gage, *Theological Poetics: Typology, Symbol and the Christ* [Fort Lauderdale, FL: Warren A. Gage, 2010]), I intend to limit my comparison of Bonhoeffer’s Christological exegesis to that which I consider a traditional understanding of Old Testament typology, which has its “basic orientation ... toward the future” in Christ (see Hummel, *The Word*, 16).

⁶ Hummel, *The Word*, 17.

interpretation of the Old Testament in that Bonhoeffer viewed the central and controlling interpretive factor to be the reality of Jesus Christ's praying the Psalms in his incarnation. *This* historical reality—namely, the historical reality of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Crucified Lord, making the Psalms his own prayer—becomes, for Bonhoeffer, *the* controlling factor for his interpretation and application of the Psalms. The experience and context of the original speaker(s) of the Psalms—David, Solomon, Asaph, etc.—are at times alluded to, but they do not play a prominent, controlling role in Bonhoeffer's exegesis. Like Augustine via *totus Christus*, Bonhoeffer seeks to determine how Jesus Christ is speaking in the Psalms. He also pursues this question beyond the theological realm by asking how Jesus prayed this psalm in his actual incarnation. It is this historical and existential perspective of Jesus praying the Psalter that becomes, for Bonhoeffer, the lens through which the Psalms find their meaning, and the church-community finds true spiritual nourishment.

Whereas a typological interpretation of the Psalms would emphasize the literal-historical reality of the original speaker (David, Solomon, Moses, Asaph, etc.), Bonhoeffer emphasizes the literal-historical reality of Jesus Christ praying the Psalms in his incarnation and links what is common between our experience and Jesus's experience. Therefore, my "hour of need" is viewed in light of Jesus's "hour of need." And likewise, the answer to prayer that God the Father gives me as I pray the Psalms is anticipated by and wrapped up in the answer to prayer that God the Father gave to his Son, Jesus Christ. God the Father always heard and answered the prayers of his Son. Thus, we too can be assured of an answer. As we bring our prayer to God "in Jesus's name" (Jn 14:13–14)—which can find no greater expression than in praying the very words which Jesus himself prayed in the Psalms—we can be likewise assured that, in Christ, God's answer is always "yes" (2 Cor 1:12). That being said, Bonhoeffer did not deny the fact that

God's answer to the prayers of Jesus lead Jesus through suffering and death (Mt 26:39, 42; Mk 14:36; Lk 22:42). This is also a reality for the church-community. Bonhoeffer's theological outlook, particularly when expressed in his interpretation of the Psalms and into the time of his imprisonment,⁷ took on an increasingly cruciform shape.⁸ He demonstrates this poignantly in his sermon on Ps 58 where he writes that praying the Psalms as the prayerbook of Christ always leads the church-community to the cross of Christ, which is the only place a real answer to the plea of the Psalms is found.⁹

It can be said, then, that Bonhoeffer believes the Psalms get their theological value for the church-community from the salvation and deliverance achieved through the work of Jesus Christ. The prayers of the Psalter serve a spiritual purpose for the present-day church-community in that they promise this same salvation and deliverance to those who pray them in union with (i.e., by faith in) Jesus Christ, the Crucified One. Thus, in his Christological interpretation of the Psalms Bonhoeffer appears to share a similar goal held by many premodern interpreters, which, as was noted in chapter one, was to “unlock the meaning of the biblical words for the present day, through theological reflection and an interpretation applied to actual circumstances.”¹⁰ In emphasizing the experience of Jesus praying the same Psalter, Bonhoeffer sought “to point out its *Sitz in unserem Leben*, the relevance for the community's faith and life that was seen as

⁷ For more on this topic of the cruciform shape of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms see chapter five of this dissertation, which covers Bonhoeffer's use of the Psalms during his imprisonment, as well as the final chapter, which includes my evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses, and contributions to current scholarship and to the contemporary church, of Bonhoeffer's interpretive approach toward the Psalms.

⁸ For a thorough survey of Bonhoeffer's understanding of Luther's *theologia crucis*, see Barker, *The Cross of Reality*.

⁹ *DBWE* 14:968–70; *DBW* 14:985–88. Brock, *Singing*, 210: “Every psalm includes within it a hermeneutics of itself because Christ is to be heard in every psalm. The presence of Christ is the rescue that the Psalms ask for, receive and praise.”

¹⁰ Fiedrowicz, “General Introduction,” 24

shaping the text's ultimate meaning within the whole Bible."¹¹ This aligns with how Geoffrey B. Kelly's defines Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms in the "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition" of *Prayerbook*:

[Bonhoeffer's] approach to [the Psalms] is not that of historical, literary exegesis searching for the human motivation, cultural milieu, historical conditioning, Hebrew usage, or even the psychological disposition of the authors. With due regard to the merits of other approaches, Bonhoeffer declared his intention to go beyond these scholarly analyses in order to offer, instead, a *theological* interpretation of the Psalter.... Although this approach renders his exegesis somewhat dated and, from a modern, scholarly point of view, debatable, Bonhoeffer seemed much more content to explore the deeper theological meaning that he felt was more congruent with the needs of people in Nazi Germany.¹²

Based on this overall introduction, I propose that one cannot speak of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms without mentioning the following two fundamental topics: prayer and Jesus Christ. It is my contention that these twin hermeneutical presuppositions must frame any analysis of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms. Therefore, in what follows in this chapter, I will consider both by first exploring the role of prayer in Bonhoeffer's understanding and exegesis of the Psalms. This will include an examination of the fundamental nature and purpose of the Psalms, along with a consideration of the relationship he draws between Jesus Christ's praying of the Psalter and the church-community's praying of the Psalter. Important to this discussion will be Bonhoeffer's sermon on Ps 42 (1935), his lecture, "Christus in den Psalmen" (1935), his book, *Life Together* (1939), and portions of his introduction to the Psalter, *Prayerbook of the Bible* (1940). Through my analysis I will show how Bonhoeffer viewed prayer as the lifeline of the church, and how this presupposition guided his exegesis and appropriation of the Psalms as the primary vehicle of the church-community's praying. Following this, I will

¹¹ Daley, "Finding the Right Key," 14. Emphasis original. It will be brought out later that this same concern is reflected in Bonhoeffer's evaluation and increasingly cautious use of the methods of historical-critical Bible study.

¹² *DBWE* 5:144.

analyze Bonhoeffer's understanding of the relationship between Jesus Christ the Crucified and the Psalms. I will focus in this section on his "Christus in den Psalmen" lecture, his *Sermon on Psalm 58* (1937) and his *Prayerbook of the Bible*. These three writings provide the clearest expression of how Bonhoeffer understood Jesus Christ's relationship to the Psalms, including the importance of Christ's own praying the Psalms in his incarnation. They will demonstrate exegetically how Bonhoeffer found Jesus Christ, the Crucified One, in the Psalms and how this, in turn, contributed to a cruciform reading of the Psalms which continued to inform his interpretation into the time of his imprisonment.

The Relationship between Prayer and the Psalms in Bonhoeffer's Interpretation

The Formative Influence of Bonhoeffer's Monastic Visits of 1935

The central role of prayer in the life of the church and in the interpretation of the Psalms was an aspect which appears to have first entered Bonhoeffer's thinking around the time of his Berlin dissertations.¹³ Early forays in Christian communal living fueled this understanding and served to further expand his view of the relationship and benefit of Scripture and prayer to spiritual formation.¹⁴ Yet it was an experience he had in the spring of 1935—during a brief time of transition between his pastorate in London and his work as the director of the Confessing Church's Preacher's Seminary in Finkenwalde, Germany¹⁵—which most profoundly impacted

¹³ Geoffrey B. Kelly ("Editor's Introduction to the English Edition" of *Life Together*, DBWE 5), 7, draws a connection back to Bonhoeffer's dissertation and his *Habilitationsschrift* when he writes: "We see in both the Berlin dissertations and in *Life Together* the traces of Bonhoeffer's inner longing for a community life in which his call to the ministry and his love for God's Word would merge to bring a more meaningful sense of direction into his life."

¹⁴ Bosanquet, *Bonhoeffer*, 106, records an earlier foray records an earlier foray into this type of spiritual communal living: "In May 1932, Bonhoeffer rented a piece of land in Biesenthal, on the outskirts of Berlin, where he and his [Berlin] students and some of his ex-confirmation candidates spent weekends together, making a first experiment in Christian community living."

¹⁵ The Confessing Church was a fellowship of German Protestant congregations born out of protest against Hitler's attempts "to bring the ... church into line with the political and ideological goals of National Socialism" (Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, "Christians Against the Nazis: the German Confessing Church," *LTJ* 20, no. 1 [May 1986]: 10–13). Barker, *The Cross of Reality*, 278: "the Reich Church would no longer ordain pastors to serve

his conception of the relationship between the Psalms, prayer, and Christian community.

In the spring of 1935, upon the conclusion of his pastoral work in London, Bonhoeffer visited three Anglican monasteries, one of which was the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield, England.¹⁶ As Edwin Robertson writes, this visit was instrumental for the formation of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms and for how he would make use of the Psalms at Finkenwalde:

[I]t was Mirfield which most affected his reading of the Psalms. There, the Community of the Resurrection went through the long Psalm 119 each day of his visit, praying their way through it. It was this experience which led to his fascination with that psalm, which from then on he referred to more than any other.¹⁷ The other effect was to change his way of interpreting the Psalms. As earlier examples show, he had had a tendency to concentrate upon one or maybe two verses as his text. While of course he took seriously the context, he emphasized the relevance of these chosen verses. In the frantic rebuilding of Berlin, for example, he concentrated on "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain" [Psa 127:1a]. When he returned to his teaching at the Old Prussian Union confessing Church seminary, he began to look at psalms as a whole.¹⁸

in the Confessing Church; therefore, the Confessing Church created 'illegal' preachers' seminaries for that purpose." Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 425, records that the seminary's initial location was in Zingst, but situations soon arose which forced them to find a new location in "the former estate of the von Katte family, in the small country town of Finkenwalde."

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Meditations on the Psalms*, ed. and trans. Edwin Robertson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 54–55. Robertson, 54: "While Bonhoeffer was in his London pastorate, he asked the bishop of Chichester to write a letter of recommendation to Mahatma Gandhi, whom he had long wished to visit. Before he could make this visit, however, an urgent invitation came from the Confessing Church of the Old Prussian Union, calling him back to Germany to direct a pastors' seminary. Before leaving, he visited, as a substitute for Gandhi, three monastic centers of the Church of England—Kelham, Mirfield, and the Oxford Fathers. He also visited various theological seminaries of other denominations, such as the Methodist one at Richmond." The Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield which Bonhoeffer visited is still in operation today (<http://www.mirfieldcommunity.org.uk/home>).

¹⁷ Ps 119 is the only psalm on which Bonhoeffer attempted to write a commentary. His unfinished commentary on Ps 119 (through v. 20) is found in *DBWE* 15:496–528; *DBW* 15:499–537. On the importance of Ps 119 to Bonhoeffer see John T. Pless, "Bonhoeffer on Psalm 119" in *The Restoration of Creation in Christ: Essays in Honor of Dean O. Wenhe*, ed. Arthur A. Just, Jr. and Paul J. Grime (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014): 231; and Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 39.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Meditations*, 54–55. See also Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 175; Bosanquet, *Bonhoeffer*, 148: "The visits to the monasteries could be only brief, but for Bonhoeffer they provided the first glimpse of a country for which he had been seeking." What he observed at Mirfield and Kelham propelled him down a path he would pursue the rest of his life." Bosanquet continues: "This steady attempt to follow Jesus was supported by the inspiration of the daily reading and prayer which was now a discipline never omitted, and whose power was penetrating ever

Like Augustine and Luther before him, Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms was dramatically influenced by his exposure to monastic tradition. The example he witnessed of Scripture-soaked spiritual community—and, specifically, spiritual community that was immersed in the Psalms through the discipline of praying the whole Psalter together—resonated with Bonhoeffer's deeply-held intellectual and theological convictions, as well as his emerging vision for equipping and forming Confessing Church pastors with a theological and practical education.¹⁹ The appreciation, understanding, and interpretation of the Psalms with which Bonhoeffer would emerge from these monastery visits exuded new clarity and conviction. As will be shown, he wasted no time in imparting these convictions to his students at Finkenwalde.

Sermon on Psalm 42 (June 2, 1935)

Bonhoeffer delivered this sermon on Ps 42 on the First Sunday after Ascension.²⁰ It was the first sermon preached to the initial class of candidates at the Confessing Church's Preacher's Seminary. This sermon serves as the earliest example of Bonhoeffer's newly-reoriented, post-monastery visit, interpretive approach toward the psalms in which he leaves behind any attempt to “get behind” the events of the text or to explicate the author's *Sitz im Leben*. Instead he expounds on the imagery of the psalm (“As the deer pants for water,” v. 1 [HB 2]; “deep calls to deep at the thunder of your waterfalls”, v. 7 [HB 8], etc.) and applies it to the existential yearning

deeper into the hidden roots of his life, to issue more and more frequently as the years went by in the direction and powerful insights which so often set him apart from those who were not capable of this kind of perception.”

¹⁹ In a letter addressed to Erwin Sutz (*DBWE* 13:217; *DBW* 13:204), dated Sept 11, 1934, Bonhoeffer confessed his lack of faith in the ability of universities to properly train pastors for ministry: “I no longer believe in the university; in fact, I never really have believed in it—to your chagrin. The next generation of pastors, these days, ought to be trained entirely in church-monastic schools, where the pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount, and worship are taken seriously—which for all three of these things is simply not the case at the university and under the present circumstances is impossible.”

²⁰ *DBWE* 14:845–54; *DBW* 14:851–60.

experienced by a “believer who has gotten too far removed from God.”²¹

In this sermon, Bonhoeffer treats the complete psalm, verse-by-verse, not just a single verse or phrase as he did earlier with his sermons on Ps 127:1; 62:2; and 98:1. This approach makes for a somewhat labored progression through the psalm, but one that Bonhoeffer animates by the inclusion of a prayer and a hymn verse after every expository comment.²² His return at every stage of the sermon to a concise written prayer demonstrates the orientation of Bonhoeffer’s approach and thus his fundamental understanding of how the psalm was to function for his audience—namely, it was to serve as a springboard, so to speak, and a vehicle for prayer, through which one could remind oneself of God’s merciful presence and provision, especially in time of doubt and loneliness. This line of thought is made clear in the sermon’s final paragraph:

Hence let go of all worry and wait! God knows the hour of help, and that hour will come as surely as God is God. God will be the help of your countenance, for God knows you and has loved you even before your creation. God will not let you falter. You are in God’s hands. Ultimately you will want only to thank God for all that has happened to you, for you have learned that the almighty God is indeed your God. Your salvation is Jesus Christ. Triune God, I give thanks to you for electing and loving me. I give thanks to you for all the paths down which you lead me. I give thanks to you for being my God. Amen.²³

This first sermon of Bonhoeffer’s tenure as director of the Preacher’s Seminary exhibited a new exegetical and interpretive direction which Bonhoeffer would experiment with and develop over the course of the next few years. Even though it stood as his first attempt at a new homiletical approach for preaching the Psalms, it was nonetheless warmly received by his budding seminarians who were just wandering out of what was, for some, a desert-like spiritual

²¹ *DBWE* 14:847; *DBW* 14:852.

²² While no explicit connection can be found in Bonhoeffer’s notes or sermon, it is possible that Bonhoeffer patterned this verse-by-verse exposition after the structure of the often-used Moravian *Losungen* or Daily Texts. As will be described further in chapter five, this devotional publication from the Moravian Church provided daily readings which included one verse from the Old Testament and another from New Testament, each one followed by a hymn verse that reflected the theme of that particular biblical text.

²³ *DBWE* 14:854; *DBW* 859–60.

experience in the university theological schools, and were now longing for a new, spiritually-reviving, encounter with Scripture at the Preacher's Seminary. As one student commented, "Bonhoeffer delivered a wonderful sermon today, i.e., it really was a genuine Confessing worship service, or better.... Everyone (and certainly we) paid close attention."²⁴

Lecture: "Christus in den Psalmen" (July 31, 1935)

The earliest manuscript we have from Bonhoeffer's academic teaching on the Psalms at Finkenwalde is a lecture he presented to the student body entitled, "Christus in den Psalmen."²⁵ The lecture was given on July 31, 1935 to a joint gathering of students from the Confessing Church Seminary and the Greifswald Department of Theology.²⁶ In this lecture, Bonhoeffer makes a number of statements about the Psalms which are quite bold and which give the clearest expression to-date of what was becoming his mature interpretive approach toward the Psalms. After briefly commenting on the Psalms as a rich source for the church-community's diverse prayer needs, he then writes: "Those who have never yet prayed the Psalms within the church-community itself but rather only alone, by themselves, do not yet know them."²⁷ He continues,

There is no access to a psalm other than through prayer; that is to say, insofar as the church-community itself appropriates the words of a psalm by praying it. The answer to the question: How am I to pray something that is still so incomprehensible to me? is: How are you to understand *what you have not yet prayed?* Rather than our own prayer being the standard for the psalm, it is rather the psalm that is the proper standard for our prayer.²⁸

In this lecture, Bonhoeffer begins by tying the interpretation of the Psalms to the spiritual

²⁴ *DBWE* 14:851n 1.

²⁵ *DBWE* 14:387-93; *DBW* 14:369-77.

²⁶ Footnote 1 in *DBWE* 14:386 states that Bonhoeffer had invited the students from Greifswald Department of Theology to attend a four-day retreat at the Confessing Church Seminary which would include morning Bible studies and afternoon presentations, including this one.

²⁷ *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:370.

²⁸ *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:370. Emphasis original.

practice of prayer, a connection which was undoubtedly reinforced by his recent monastery visits. These monastic communities had demonstrated for him a way of praying the Psalms that was less individualistic and more communal, carried out “within the church-community itself.” Besides adding structure and biblical content to the community’s daily routine, this example had also opened up for Bonhoeffer a way of reading the Psalms that he believed was filled with potential for his students and the church. It furthermore introduced prayer as a hermeneutical tool for understanding the Psalms. Bonhoeffer states, “The content of these prayers emerges only where those praying are not just individual believers but rather the church-community judged and sanctified by God.”²⁹ Concerned as Bonhoeffer was with the revitalization of the church, and convinced that new models of pastoral formation and education were needed for this to happen, he implemented a daily structure at Finkenwalde which immersed his ordinands in monastic-like activities,³⁰ including communal times of long Scripture readings, hymn singing, Scripture meditation, and praying the Psalms. It was this aspect of the life together at Finkenwalde which was, at once, the most unique and the most controversial.

As if anticipating—or, perhaps, responding to—criticism from his students,³¹ Bonhoeffer asks the question in this lecture, “How am I to pray something that is still so incomprehensible to

²⁹ *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:370.

³⁰ The seminary setting in Finkenwalde gave Bonhoeffer a unique spiritual and communal setting in which he could enact his long-held understanding of the church as “Christ existing as community”—the fundamental definition Bonhoeffer gave for the church in *Sanctorum Communio* (See *DBWE* 1:137–41, 143; *DBW* 1:85–87, 88–89). To deepen this experience, Bonhoeffer created within the larger seminary roster a smaller and voluntary “Protestant Community of Brothers [*Bruderhaus*], in which we will, as pastors, attempt for some years to live a common Christian life.” Bosanquet, *Bonhoeffer*, 156, cites Bonhoeffer’s description of this “community within a community” from the circular publication of the Old Prussian Union, the *Bruderrat*: “[t]he brothers would be willing...to renounce all financial and other privileges of their status as pastors and to hold themselves in readiness to go wherever their services were required. They would consider the House of Brothers to be their home and would go out from it and return to it when any particular tour of duty was finished.” Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 182, records that the *Bruderhaus* began in 1935 with six initial participants.

³¹ According to Barker and Brocker, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937* (*DBWE* 14:82n 3), Bonhoeffer prepared this lecture in response to the questions students were asking due to the increased use of the Psalms in the morning worship and evening devotions.

me?” For many of his students who had been educated in the European university system, the Psalms (along with much of the Old Testament) was somewhat undervalued and unfamiliar territory. Lack of Old Testament exposure and understanding fostered deference for the New Testament and disregard for the Old Testament. The answer Bonhoeffer posited to his own question was simply, “How are you to understand *what you have not yet prayed?*”³² Rather than allowing a lack of familiarity and understanding to prevent one from praying the Psalter, Bonhoeffer—convinced of the validity and benefit of what he observed at Mirfield—suggests that praying the Psalms *is the way* that understanding is given. Praying the Psalms *yields* understanding of them as God speaks through his Word.³³ For this reason Bonhoeffer taught that the “prayer of the Psalter is ... not a model of prayer ... [but] first and foremost a word bound not to us but to God, a word we *are to hear*.”³⁴ God speaks his Word in the Psalms. This is the Word which his church-community is first to hear, then to speak back in prayer, thus making God’s own speech the church-community’s prayer. As Bonhoeffer contends: “If the Psalter is indeed God’s word, then it is God who is doing the speaking in these prayers, God who is doing the praying.”³⁵

³² *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:370. Emphasis original.

³³ From Finkenwalde on Bonhoeffer repeatedly emphasized the importance of meditating on Scripture. See, for example, his statement in *Life Together*, *DBWE* 5:86–87; *DBW* 5:70, on the benefits of the pastoral candidates daily time of meditation on Scripture: “This time for meditation does not allow us to sink into the void and bottomless pit of aloneness [Alleinsein], rather it allows us to be alone [allein] with the Word. In so doing it gives us solid ground on which to stand and clear guidance for the steps we have to take.” Bonhoeffer later provided instructions on the practice of Scripture meditation for his pastoral colleagues in “Guide to Daily Meditation” (*DBWE* 14:931–36; *DBW* 14:945–50). It is quite possible that, when he speaks of understanding that is gained through praying, he is thinking of understanding that is gained through meditation upon Scripture within the act of praying the Psalms.

³⁴ *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:370. Emphasis original. This is reminiscent of what Bonhoeffer would later write in *Prayerbook* (*DBWE* 5:156–57; *DBW* 5:110–11), where he brings out the dual nature of the Psalms as Word of God and words of the church community.

³⁵ *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:371.

Bonhoeffer conceived of prayer as the “privileged center of the church’s spiritual life”³⁶ and as that which God does *with* us.³⁷ As God’s Word, the Psalms are given to the church-community in order that they might pray them and, in doing so, learn *from* them *how* to pray. With this in mind Bonhoeffer begins his final publication on the Psalms, an introduction to the Psalms entitled *Prayerbook of the Bible*, with the disciples’ request from Lk 11:1, “Lord, teach us to pray.”³⁸ He admits that, “‘To learn to pray’ sounds contradictory to us.”³⁹ But it is for this reason that God has given a prayerbook within the divinely inspired Scripture. He explains,

we must learn to pray. The child learns to speak because the parent speaks to the child. The child learns the language of the parent. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken and speaks to us. In the language of the Father in heaven God’s children learn to speak with God. Repeating God’s own words, we begin to pray to God. We ought to speak to God, and God wishes to hear us, not in the false and confused language of our heart but in the clear and pure language that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ. God’s speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures. If we want to pray with assurance and joy, then the word of Holy Scripture must be the firm foundation of our prayer. Here we know that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, teaches us to pray. The words that come from God will be the steps on which we find our way to God.⁴⁰

The “word of Holy Scripture” which provides “the firm foundation of our prayer” is, for Bonhoeffer, the Psalter.

Publication: *Life Together* (1937)

This conviction of the Psalter’s tightly-knit relationship with prayer is a distinctive theme

³⁶ Kelly, “Introduction,” *DBWE* 5:145. This priority for prayer is noted by Kelly, “Introduction,” *DBWE* 5:145: “Personal and communal prayer had a regular, firmly set place in Bonhoeffer’s life. He once wrote from the Benedictine monastery at Ettal that ‘a day without [their] morning and evening prayers and personal intercession was a day without meaning or importance.’ Like Luther and in keeping with the monastic tradition, Bonhoeffer saw prayer as the ‘day’s first worship service to God.’ As a seminary director and pastor himself, he urged his seminarians, as preachers of the Word, to be mindful of the urgency of letting the Word of God speak to them daily. ‘Pastors,’ he said, ‘must pray more than others, and they have more to pray.’”

³⁷ *DBWE* 5:156; *DBW* 5:107.

³⁸ *DBWE* 5:155; *DBW* 5:107.

³⁹ *DBWE* 5:155; *DBW* 5:107.

⁴⁰ *DBWE* 5:156; *DBW* 5:107–8.

in Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms from Finkenwalde and beyond. He clarifies this conviction even further in *Life Together*, a book which was written as a summary of "the nature and sustaining structures of Christian community, based on the 'life together' that he and his seminarians had sustained both at the seminary and in the Brothers' House at Finkenwalde."⁴¹ In this publication Bonhoeffer summarizes the way of life in the *Bruderhaus*⁴² under five chapter headings: Community; The Day Together; The Day Alone; Service; and Confession and the Lord's Supper. As evidenced particularly in the chapter entitled "The Day Together," one of Bonhoeffer's aims at Finkenwalde was to contribute to the recovery of the Psalter among his students through the intentional shaping of their day which began and ended with the praying of Psalms.⁴³

In this summary of the spiritual vision and accompanying structures at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer suggests three benefits that result from the regular practice of praying the Psalms. The first is that we learn "what prayer means: it means praying on the basis of the Word of God,

⁴¹ Kelly, "Introduction" to *Life Together* (DBWE 5:3). Barker, 328, observes that "*Life Together* was not a book Bonhoeffer planned to write.... It was because of the action by the Gestapo in the summer of 1937 to close down the illegal seminaries of the Confessing Church that Bonhoeffer was motivated to put his thoughts down on paper." Kelly, 3, comments: "Bonhoeffer had been reluctant to publicize this experiment, feeling that the time was not ripe. With the closing of the seminary at Finkenwalde and the dispersal of the seminarians, however, Bonhoeffer felt compelled not only to record for posterity the daily regimen and its rationale, but also to voice his conviction that the worldwide church itself needed to promote a sense of community like this if it was to have new life breathed into it."

⁴² The *Bruderhaus* was a close-knit and voluntary spiritual community which Bonhoeffer established within the student ranks of the Confessing Church Seminary in Finkenwalde. In Bonhoeffer's own words (Bosanquet, *Bonhoeffer*, 156), the *Bruderhaus* was a "Protestant Community of Brothers, in which we will, as pastors, attempt for some years to live a common Christian life." Bosanquet, *Bonhoeffer*, 156, then cites Bonhoeffer's further explanation as written in the circular publication of the Old Prussian Union, the *Bruderrat*: "The brothers would be willing...to renounce all financial and other privileges of their status as pastors and to hold themselves in readiness to go wherever their services were required. They would consider the House of Brothers to be their home and would go out from it and return to it when any particular tour of duty was finished." Schlingensiepen, 182, records that the *Bruderhaus* began in 1935 with six initial participants.

⁴³ DBWE 5:53; DBW 5:38: "From ancient times in the church a special significance has been attached to the *praying of Psalms* together. In many churches to this day the Psalter is used at the beginning of every service of daily worship together. The practice has been lost to a large extent, and we must now recover the meaning of praying the Psalms." Emphasis original.

on the basis of promises.”⁴⁴ As noted above, Bonhoeffer believed that prayer was more than just a natural expression of the human heart. It needed to be learned. This conviction was drawn, in part, from the example of Jesus’s disciples who, in Lk 11:1, came to Jesus and asked him to teach them how to pray.⁴⁵ “Christian prayer,” Bonhoeffer writes, “has nothing to do with vague self-seeking desires” but rather “takes its stand on the solid ground of the revealed Word.” To pray “in the right way” is to pray “only in the name of Jesus Christ,”⁴⁶ which is what his church-community does as they pray the words of Scripture as found in the Psalter.

Second, “we learn from the prayer of the Psalms what we should pray.”⁴⁷ As Bonhoeffer poignantly states in *Prayerbook*: “If we were dependent on ourselves alone, we would probably often pray only the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer. But God wants it otherwise. Not the poverty of our heart, but the richness of God’s word, ought to determine our prayer.”⁴⁸ In the same way that reading the Scriptures broadens our perspective and makes us aware of God’s ways and his will, so, Bonhoeffer argued, praying the Psalms broadens our attentiveness to the needs that we and the world around us have, opening these needs up to God’s power and leading to appropriate human action.⁴⁹

A third and final benefit of praying the Psalms that Bonhoeffer suggests is that it “teaches

⁴⁴ *DBWE* 5:55; *DBW* 5:40.

⁴⁵ See *DBWE* 5:155; *DBW* 5:107.

⁴⁶ *DBWE* 5:55; *DBW* 5:40.

⁴⁷ *DBWE* 5:56; *DBW* 5:40.

⁴⁸ *DBWE* 5:157; *DBW* 5:109.

⁴⁹ A widely-noted example of this stems from an event known as *Kristallnacht* which occurred on November 9, 1938. Following this tragic event in which the Nazis destroyed Jewish shops and synagogues, Bonhoeffer saw in Ps 74 (particularly vv. 6-8) a poignant description of these events. As an aid for prayer, he encouraged his students to meditate on Psalm 74 (along with Zech 2:8; Rom 9:4; 11:11–15) in light of this act of injustice against the Jews. Kelly, “Introduction” to *Prayerbook* in *DBWE* 5, 148, suggests that this was a typical instance of how Bonhoeffer “prayed the Psalms and meditated on them in a way that linked them to life, in this case a most tragic event in Germany, opening that event itself up to the kind of prayer that could lead to protest and counteraction. For Bonhoeffer, psalmodic prayer was never meant to be encased in little modules of time with little or no reference to the events of life.”

us to pray as a community.”⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer asserts that through praying the Psalms, “The body of Christ is praying, and I as an individual recognize that my prayer is only a tiny fraction of the whole prayer of the church. I learn to join the body of Christ in its prayer. That lifts me above my personal concerns and allows me to pray selflessly.”⁵¹ Bonhoeffer recognizes in this third benefit a practical and a theological dimension, both related to the characteristic of repetition carried along by the Psalter’s parallelism, where “the same idea in different words [is expressed] in the second line of the verse.”⁵² Practically, he suggests that this structure allows for the Psalms to be prayed antiphonally within a communal setting.⁵³ Yet theologically, and more profoundly, he proposes:

Is this not meant to be an indication that the one who prays never prays alone? There must always be a second person, another, a member of the church, the body of Christ, indeed Jesus Christ himself, praying with the Christian in order that the prayer of the individual may be true prayer. In the repetition of the same subject, which is heightened in Psalm 119 to such a degree that it seems it does not want to end and becomes so simple that it is virtually impervious to our exegetical analysis, is there not the suggestion that every word of prayer must penetrate to a depth of the heart which can be reached only by unceasing repetition? And in the end not even in that way! Is that not an indication that prayer is not a matter of a unique pouring out of the human heart in need or joy, but an unbroken, indeed continuous, process of learning, appropriating and impressing God’s will in Jesus Christ on the mind?⁵⁴

Prayer, for Bonhoeffer, is always a communal activity—carried out, whenever possible, among the church-community. Yet even if it is done alone, it is always to be viewed in light of

⁵⁰ *DBWE* 5:57; *DBW* 5:42.

⁵¹ *DBWE* 5:57; *DBW* 5:42.

⁵² *DBWE* 5:57; *DBW* 5:42. The topic of the nature and function of parallelism in the Psalter was seminaly explored in 1753 by Oxford professor and Anglican Bishop Robert Lowth in which he identified parallelism as a hallmark of Hebrew poetry. Several other scholars have built upon Lowth’s work including Stephen Geller, *Parallelism in Biblical Poetry* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1979); James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Poetry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

⁵³ *DBWE* 5:57; *DBW* 5:42.

⁵⁴ *DBWE* 5:57–58; *DBW* 5:42.

one's fellowship with the *sanctorum communio*, a relationship established by one's union with Christ through faith in Christ.⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer held that the Psalter's parallelism communicates this reality as it also calls us to recognize a more fundamental truth—namely, that we are not only accompanied by the *sanctorum communio* in our praying but also by Jesus Christ, who is the head of the *sanctorum communio*. When we pray the Psalter we not only pray *in Christ*, we pray *with Christ*. The Psalms, as the prayerbook of the church, not only teach this understanding of prayer, they make it possible to experience.

Convinced as he was that these benefits were real and desperately needed for the revival of the church, Bonhoeffer set in place a structure at Finkenwalde which supported his vision. By most accounts, Bonhoeffer's methods were hesitantly received, both among his students⁵⁶ and within the broader Confessing Church.⁵⁷ Yet Bonhoeffer persisted, aware that few within the ranks of Protestant clergy and congregations were familiar with exactly *how* to go about the activity of praying the Psalms. Thus he offers these words of instruction in *Life Together* by means of tracing out a typical experience of those who were beginning to learn to pray the Psalter:

⁵⁵ This conviction, I believe, continues to influence Bonhoeffer's experience of prayer into the time of his imprisonment. For, even when one is isolated from Christian community in a setting such as a Nazi prison, one can still pray with the *sanctorum communio*. This reality is experienced as one prays the shared prayers of the church in the Psalter in union with Christ and with one another by means of faith in Jesus Christ.

⁵⁶ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 462–64. Despite initial resistance from his students, Kelly, "Introduction" to *Prayerbook DBWE 5*, 147, reports how they eventually came to appreciate this practice: In time, "[t]hey had come to realize that this form of prayer was a profound help in their forming an independent relationship with God and with God's Word."

⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer wrote the following in a letter to Karl Barth (*DBWE 5*:122; *DBW 5*:136; see also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom: Letters, Lectures and Notes: 1935–1939*, ed. Edwin H. Robert, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 117–18: "When a leading man of the Confessing Church said to me recently, 'We don't have any time now for meditation; the candidates should learn to preach and teach the catechism,' that is either total ignorance of what a young seminarian is today, or it is culpable ignorance about how a sermon or catechism lesson comes to life. The questions that are seriously put to us today by young seminarians are the following: How do I learn to pray? How do I learn to read the Bible? If we cannot help them in this, we do not help them at all."

First, they try to repeat the Psalms personally as their own prayer. But soon they come across passages that they feel they cannot pray as their own personal prayers... They can read and hear them as the prayer of another person, wonder about them, be offended by them, but they can neither pray them themselves nor expunge them from the Holy Scriptures... However, this difficulty actually indicates the point at which we may get our first glimpse of the secret of the Psalter. The psalms that will not cross our lips as prayers, those that make us falter and offend us, make us suspect that here someone else is praying, not we—that the one who is here affirming his innocence, who is calling for God’s judgment, who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ himself. It is he who is praying here, and not only here, but in the whole Psalter. The New Testament and the church have always recognized and testified to this truth.⁵⁸

Bonhoeffer’s encouragement toward an inductive approach of praying the Psalms not only served the purpose of teaching one how to pray by engaging them in a pattern and vocabulary of divinely-inspired prayer, it also exposes them to an interpretive dilemma⁵⁹ which, in Bonhoeffer’s estimation, had a singular solution. That solution—which he calls the “secret of the Psalter—is Jesus Christ. The Psalms are not just the prayerbook of the church, given to fill the mouths of the faithful as they make petition and cry out to God. The Psalms are fundamentally the prayerbook of Christ who prayed these prayers in his humanity and continues to pray them now on behalf of and in union with his church.

The Relationship between Christ the Crucified and the Psalms in Bonhoeffer’s Interpretation

The topic of Bonhoeffer’s Christology has been of great interest to Bonhoeffer scholars, many of whom have recognized the significance of Christology to his theology.⁶⁰ H. Gaylon

⁵⁸ *DBWE* 5:53; *DBW* 5:38–39.

⁵⁹ I will take up Bonhoeffer’s discussion of the interpretive “problems” encountered in the praying of the Psalter—problems which he labels as both pastoral and theological in nature—in the following section on Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the relationship between Christ the Crucified and the Psalms.

⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer gave lectures on Christology, recorded in student notes in “Lectures on Christology” (*DBWE* 12:299–360; *DBW* 12:279–348). In addition to those sources quoted here, see also Harry G. Aveling, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christology,” *Colloq* 16, no. 1 (1983): 23–30; Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theological Interpretation of Scripture for the Church,” *ExAud* (17:2001): 1–30; Christiane Tietz, “Bonhoeffer’s Strong Christology in the Context of Religious Pluralism” in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical*

Barker states, “From beginning to end, Christology was the driving force that gave shape to Bonhoeffer’s theology, marked by an intense concentration on the person of Jesus and the cross.”⁶¹ Likewise, John Godsey writes, “The unifying element in Bonhoeffer’s theology is his Christology, and it is precisely the Christology that impelled his theological development.”⁶² Therefore, it should not be a surprise to find a strong Christological emphasis in Bonhoeffer’s writings on the Psalms, particularly in those writings which come from the time of his leadership at Finkenwalde: his “Christus in den Psalmen” lecture, his sermon on Ps 58, and his *Prayerbook of the Bible*. What these writings show is, first, an understanding of Jesus Christ as the hermeneutical key to interpreting the Psalms. As evidence of this, nearly every treatment Bonhoeffer gives to the Psalter from Finkenwalde onward speaks to some degree of the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And, a second theme these writings make evident is Bonhoeffer’s conviction that Jesus Christ is present in the Psalms as Christ the Crucified. This characteristic is particularly noticeable in its influence on Bonhoeffer’s *theologia crucis*, a prominent aspect to his interpretation which he carries into the time of his imprisonment. What follows is an examination of these three works on the Psalms, with special attention given to the basis and nature of Bonhoeffer’s Christological exegesis demonstrated in them.

Lecture: “Christus in den Psalmen” (July 31, 1935)

Among the body of writings from Bonhoeffer on the Psalms, his “Christus in den Psalmen” lecture once again serves as an early and valuable resource. In this lecture Bonhoeffer expresses—with a sense of clarity not observable in his earlier writings—an understanding of the

Perspectives, Emerging Issue, ed. Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 181–96.

⁶¹ Barker, *The Cross of Reality*, 1.

⁶² John Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 264.

relationship of Jesus Christ to the Psalter which situates the God-Man Jesus Christ as the hermeneutical key to interpreting the Psalter. He centers this discussion on his conviction that the Psalms are both Holy Scripture *and* prayers of the church-community. That is, the Psalms are both *divine* words and *human* words. From this reality arise two problems, which Bonhoeffer identifies as, first, a theological problem and, second, a pastoral problem.

The theological problem revolves around the issue of the Psalms being considered God's inspired word, and yet, also as human prayers. As the inspired Word of God, the prayers in the Psalter are first to be understood as *God's own prayers* which are then given to the church-community to speak back to God through their own praying. Bonhoeffer writes, "If the Psalter is indeed God's word, then it is God who is doing the speaking in these prayers, God who is doing the praying."⁶³ Bonhoeffer suggests that, in the prayers of the Psalms, God is the one who is praying. Yet, to whom is prayer directed if not to God himself? As a result, "God [is] the one praying and God [is] the one answering prayer."⁶⁴ This appears to present a theological challenge which, Bonhoeffer proposes, is unique to the book of the Psalms.⁶⁵

The second problem Bonhoeffer mentions is pastoral in nature, and it again emerges as a result of the Psalms being both divine *and* human words. The problem has to do with how the church-community is to pray certain parts of the Psalter that appear to be ungodly or "impious." And, if there are indeed "ungodly" prayers in the Psalter, how can they be understood as divine in origin? On Bonhoeffer's mind with this question are the numerous psalms which petition God to carry out vengeance against the psalmist's enemies. These prayers come from psalms categorized as vengeance or imprecation psalms. Bonhoeffer demonstrates the importance of this

⁶³ *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:371. See *Prayerbook* (*DBWE* 5:156–57; *DBW* 108–9) for additional comments on how Bonhoeffer believed the Psalms were, first, God's word.

⁶⁴ *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:371.

⁶⁵ *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:370.

question by not only addressing it specifically in this lecture, but by also discussing it more fully in his later writings of *Life Together*⁶⁶ and *Prayerbook*.⁶⁷ Additionally, he treats a full psalm of vengeance in his sermon on Ps 58 (discussed below).

The way Bonhoeffer resolves both of these problems is by reference to Jesus Christ. Regarding the first problem—the theological problem of how God can be both the one praying and answering the prayers of the Psalms—Bonhoeffer writes,

No prayer can find the way to God that our *intercessor* Jesus Christ does not himself pick up and pray for us, that is not prayed *in the name of Jesus Christ*. . . . Hence there can be Christian prayer only on the basis of the spoken word of God in Jesus Christ and on the basis of the eternal intercession of Jesus Christ for his church—community. That means, however, that *Christian prayer is prayer that is bound to the Holy Scriptures*. Moreover the proper presupposition of Christian prayer is precisely that here, too, God remains the one doing the speaking, the subject, that it is the word of God, that is, the prayer of the high priest Jesus Christ. The Psalter itself brings this situation to expression in a special way insofar as it encounters us as the prayer of the church—community of God and as Holy Scripture. But this says nothing more than that Christ is the supplicant in the Psalter and that we repeat and pray these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ. What is important now is . . . that we understand and pray together these psalms as the prayers of Jesus Christ in his church—community or as the prayers of the church—community in the name of Jesus Christ.⁶⁸

Jesus Christ resolves the theological problem that the Psalms present because Jesus is himself both fully God and fully man. As the second person of the Trinity, Jesus is God incarnate giving voice to the prayers of the Psalter. Jesus validates the Psalms as God’s divine Word by speaking them through prayer. In praying them in his incarnation he expresses every need and experience encountered by humanity. Jesus, our Intercessor, then brings these prayers before the throne of God. In his person he carries these prayers—which are at once his prayers *and* the prayers of the

⁶⁶ *DBWE* 5:53–54; *DBW* 5:39.

⁶⁷ *DBWE* 5:174–76; *DBW* 5:128–30. The probing question Bonhoeffer (*DBWE* 5:174; *DBW* 5:129) takes on in this section of *Prayerbook* is, are these psalms, too, the Word of God? Or do they represent a “so-called preliminary religious stage [religiöse Vorstufe] in relation to the New Testament. . . . Can we pray these psalms as Christians?” This is a question he explicitly answers in his sermon on Ps 58.

⁶⁸ *DBWE* 14:388–89; *DBW* 14:371–72.

church-community—to the throne of God the Father, who alone is able to answer them. Only Jesus can resolve the theological mystery of how the Psalms can be both divine word and human word, and of how, in Christ, God can be viewed as both praying these prayers and answering them.

Bonhoeffer then explores the pastoral problem of the Psalms, which stems from the church-community taking up the prayers of the Psalter as their own and, in doing so, encountering prayers considered “ungodly” or “impious” by some.⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer maintains that because Jesus Christ prays the Psalter, the church-community now understands *all* the prayers of the Psalms in light of Jesus. Jesus prays the Psalter as One who is fully God and fully Man. Therefore, there cannot be any part of these prayers considered unspeakable. The pastoral problem of how the church-community is to pray certain vengeance psalms is resolved, for Bonhoeffer, in the fact that Jesus has made the Psalms his prayerbook, therefore “it is no longer left to the arbitrariness and subjectivity of individuals to select which prayers they can or cannot pray, since now the question of the ‘value’ ... of this or that psalm is rejected as being impermissible and inappropriate”⁷⁰ Martin Kuske, in his appraisal of Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the Old Testament, expands Bonhoeffer’s attitude toward the Psalter to include the whole Bible when he writes that “Bonhoeffer reads *all* Holy Scripture as the book of Christ”⁷¹ and therefore believes that no text, not even in the Old Testament, is to be excluded “when it is brought into relation to

⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer (*DBWE* 14:389–90; *DBW* 14:373) addresses this problem by contrasting his view with what was known at that time as the “orthodox interpretation” of the Psalter. According to Bonhoeffer, the orthodox interpretation of the Psalms (a position represented by scholars such as Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg) believes: (1) all biblical assertions of authorship in the Psalter are genuine; (2) the “I” of the psalms is the voice of Christ in his Old Testament community; (3) there is no ungodly or impious prayer in the Psalter.

⁷⁰ *DBWE* 14:389; *DBW* 14:372.

⁷¹ Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 32. Emphasis original. Kuske, 39, goes on to say that for Bonhoeffer Jesus Christ as *the* revelation of God [incarnate, crucified, and risen] stands between us and the Old Testament.” See also Bonhoeffer’s Bible study “King David” (*DBWE* 14:870–93; *DBW* 14:878–904). In a cover page outline to this Bible study Bonhoeffer writes (*DBWE* 14:870n 2): “The Old Testament must be read in the light of the incarnation and crucifixion.”

Christ.”⁷² It is this conviction, Kuske maintains, that allows Bonhoeffer to see Jesus Christ acting, speaking, and praying in the Psalms, even in such difficult texts as the psalms of vengeance.

In addressing this pastoral problem in the psalms, Bonhoeffer speaks of the incarnation of Christ in the world, which in itself means that Jesus dwells among those who believe in him as well as those who reject him. This same reality applies in the world of the Psalms, where Christ is present among the pious and the impious. In a section of this lecture which stands outside the finished manuscript, and contains only “catchwords in pencil,”⁷³ Bonhoeffer speaks to this pastoral problem in a manner resembling Augustine’s *totus Christus*. He identifies the subject (speaker) of the Psalms as Christ the Crucified, who, at times, is praying in the voice of sinful humanity and is therefore the One being “prayed against.” He explains,

Thus does Christ enter *into* the world, and we pray stammering after Christ and ask for Christ’s grace. We know: *we* are the enemies who pray thus—and we are those who have been pardoned through the cross. Is there a *fundamental difference* between such prayers and the *prayers of believers*? No, precisely in faith it is not we who are the subject, but Christ is the one praying for us.⁷⁴

This terse and somewhat confusing statement is given a bit more clarity by Eberhard Bethge whose handwritten notes on this part of the lecture include the following comments on how a Christian can appropriate the so-called “impious” prayers in the Psalter:

⁷² Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 96. See also Walter Harrelson, “Bonhoeffer and the Bible” in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Essays on the Problems and Possibilities of His Thought*, ed. Martin E. Marty (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1962), 117: “In Bonhoeffer’s other writings it is made clear that the *entire* Bible is to be interpreted in relation to Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is no less the Bible of the Church than is the New Testament.... He insists that Christ is found in the Old as well as in the New Testament, and not alone in those passages which herald the coming of the Messiah.”

⁷³ H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brocker, editor’s comments in *DBWE* 14:391n 14.

⁷⁴ *DBWE* 14:391; *DBW* 14:375. Emphasis original. Bethge’s handwritten lecture notes (*DBWE* 14:392; *DBW* 14:376) record another account of Bonhoeffer’s explanation of this concept: “The situation in the psalm is none other than the situation in the New Testament as well. In the New Testament, too, the voices of those who have been rejected also emerge, of those who nailed him to the cross. ‘Crucify him.’ It is the rejection of Christ that passes similarly through both the Old Testament and New Testament. On the one hand, the guilt of those who say it, on the other, the grace that is the event of the cross. Hence Christ in the Psalms is Christ the Crucified.”

There ... remains the impiety and piety of the one praying in the psalm. The worldliness of the psalm.... This situation in the psalm is none other than the situation in the New Testament as well. In the New Testament, too, the voices of those who have been rejected also emerge, of those who nailed him to the cross. ‘Crucify him.’ It is the rejection of Christ that passes similarly through both the Old Testament and the New Testament.... Hence Christ in the Psalms is Christ the Crucified.... How [are we] to pray the psalms that express the rejection of Christ? ... Prayer [is] not repetition of the word of the individual psalmist, rather [the] subject of this prayer, too, is Christ the Crucified. He himself prays among the godless: Crucify him. He thus enters into the world, and we, stammering, pray the same prayer knowing that we are the enemies who pray this way and we [are] the pardoned ones who are pardoned by the cross.⁷⁵

Bonhoeffer likens the “impious” prayers of the Psalms to the “impious” prayer, “Crucify him,” that the crowds shouted on the day of Jesus Christ’s rejection (Mt 27:22–23; Mk 15:13–14; Lk 23:21; Jn 19:15). In atoning for the sins of the world Jesus, in effect, accepted that cry into his own mouth. He became, as it were, so fully one with the godless crowd of rejecters that he took their words as his own. In this way *he prayed against himself*. This prayer, “Crucify him,” is not one we are to pray by way of repetition any more than the psalms which call down “impious” curses are to be our heartfelt prayer. Even though we are not to offer prayers which call for the destruction of our enemies, we nonetheless do on account of our sinful nature. In this we betray our identity as sinners and enemies of God, and thus people who are deserving of wrath. Yet we are graciously pardoned by Jesus, who bore the guilt of all his enemies through his substitutionary death on the cross. As Bonhoeffer will explicate in his sermon on Ps 58, the Psalms’ imprecations cannot be seen as simply human expressions of vengeance toward human enemies. Instead, they need to be heard in the mouth of Jesus Christ, praying in his own righteousness *and* in the wickedness of humanity which he took upon himself as an atoning sacrifice (2 Cor 5:21).

Bonhoeffer therefore resolves the tension of these two problems by situating Jesus Christ at

⁷⁵ DBWE 14:392; DBW 14:376–77.

the heart of his interpretation of the Psalter. Jesus is the God-Man who both speaks these prayers in his humanity and in his eternal intercession before the throne of God. Jesus is God incarnate praying the prayers of the Psalter, and he is also God answering the prayers that he prays. As the sinless Son of God praying the Psalms, Jesus's prayer is always accepted. His prayer is viewed in light of the cross where he became the Godless One, pardoning sin and redeeming those whose rebellion led them to pray "Crucify him" with the crowds. Even though Bonhoeffer presents these two problems as "resolved ... in Jesus Christ,"⁷⁶ it is important to note that he is not so cavalier as to assume that this satisfies all inquirers. For this reason, he suggests, "we will have to be content from the very outset with having some riddles remain unresolved, though rather than curiously trying to examine these riddles we will instead gratefully pray these prayers together about which we *not only know* but *also understand* that they are the prayers of Jesus Christ himself."⁷⁷

Sermon: Psalm 58 (July 11, 1937)

The unique nature of Bonhoeffer's Christological exegesis of the Psalms is no more clearly on display than in his sermon on Ps 58, which he delivered to the Confessing Church seminarians on July 11, 1937.⁷⁸ Of vital importance to Bonhoeffer's exegesis is the *Sitz im Leben* in which this sermon was delivered. As David McI. Gracie explains, 1937 was a tumultuous year

⁷⁶ *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:371.

⁷⁷ *DBWE* 14:389; *DBW* 14:373. Emphasis original.

⁷⁸ *DBWE* 14:963–70; *DBW* 14:980–88. Having been in session for over two years, the candidates in the Finkenwalde seminary were quite accustomed to frequent use of the Psalter. Yet it was this exposition of a particularly difficult psalm of vengeance that produced a rather startling response. As Barker and Brocker, *DBWE* 14:963n 1, report, "The sermon generated energetic controversy among the candidates, prompting criticism above all of the David-Christ relationship, which hardly allowed David to be understood as a real human being with human reactions and feelings of revenge, and of the rather exclusively proclaimed verification of God's vengeance through the cross of Christ." Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 89, understands this sermon as a partial expansion of the lecture from July 31, 1935, according to which God enters the world to the Psalter so that Christ is in this world among the righteous and the hostile.

for the Confessing Church, a year which saw Hitler's Nazi program carry out bold incursions into the activities and leadership structures of the churches of Germany:

By the end of 1937, 804 members of the Confessing Church had been imprisoned for longer or shorter periods." Pastor Martin Niemoeller was imprisoned by the Nazis on July 1, 1937.... In 1937 the wave of persecution began to engulf former Finkenwaldians. Letters spoke of interrogations, house searches, confiscations and arrests.... On September 28, 1937 the Gestapo sealed the doors of the seminary at Finkenwalde.... The sermon on Psalm 58 arose in this context. It can be seen as an attempt to pronounce the judgment of God on the Nazi regime, while still holding Christians back from any direct role as agents of that judgment.⁷⁹

Bonhoeffer recognized the increasing force of wickedness in his time. He saw the church being oppressed by a tyrannical foe in the form of Hitler's Third Reich. He saw his students, and the church at-large, wrestling with the question of how to properly react to this looming threat. He found an answer in the prayer of Ps 58.

At issue in this sermon are the same two "problems" Bonhoeffer discussed in his "Christus in den Psalmen" lecture: the relationship of Jesus Christ to the "I" (speaker) of the Psalms; and the nature of the Psalms as both word of God and prayers of the church-community.⁸⁰

Bonhoeffer's strong conviction regarding the relationship of the Psalms to prayer prompts him to begin his sermon by asking, "Is this terrible psalm of vengeance really our prayer? Are we even permitted to pray this way?"⁸¹ These opening questions allude to the fact that Bonhoeffer does, in fact, recognize the problems this psalm of vengeance presents to the Christian faith of the church-community. Yet his acceptance of even the most difficult portions of this psalm (especially vv. 6–9 [HB 7–10] and v. 10 [HB 11]) as authoritative and inspired by God also

⁷⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "On Psalm 58: A Sermon on a Psalm of Vengeance" in *Meditating on the Word*, 2nd ed., trans. David McL. Gracie (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2000), 73–74. Quotations within this quotation come from an unidentified source.

⁸⁰ Bonhoeffer's treatment of this difficult psalm as one which the church-community is still called to pray springs from his conviction that *all* of the psalms are given for the church-community to pray. As he says in *Prayerbook* (DBWE 5:157; DBW 5:109): "The Psalms have been given to us precisely so that we can learn to pray them in the name of Jesus Christ."

⁸¹ DBWE 14:964; DBW 14:981.

exemplifies his conviction that “the entire Old Testament belongs to Christ”⁸² and that it can, therefore, be faithfully interpreted “in light of Christ the *crucified*.”⁸³

This foundational hermeneutical conviction was met with contention from scholars such as J. Fichtner who considered imprecatory psalms of this nature to be opposed to the “spirit of Christ,” which he suggests is demonstrated in the gracious words of Jesus Christ from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34). Thus, Fichtner argues, the church-community of Jesus Christ may pray *some* of the psalms, but not *this* psalm.⁸⁴ Although Bonhoeffer clearly contests Fichtner’s view, his preliminary homiletical answer appears to align with it: “Our initial answer to this question must be quite clear: No, we, we are certainly *not* permitted to pray this way!” His stated reason for this follows: “After all, we ourselves bear much of the guilt for the hostility that we encounter and that brings us trouble.”⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer does not negate this way of praying on the basis that it stands opposed to the spirit of Christ, but only because it calls for the one praying in such a manner to, himself, be without guilt, a reality that is not possible for any human person. The one who would want to pray this prayer of vengeance must first be without guilt and completely innocent. And so, Bonhoeffer queries further,

⁸² Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 124.

⁸³ Kuske, *The Old Testament*, 90. Emphasis original.

⁸⁴ J. Fichtner, “Vom Psalmbeten. Ist das Beten aller Psalmen der christlichen Gemeinde möglich und heilsam?” *Wort und Dienst* 1952 (*Jarbuch der Theologischen Schule Bethel*), 59, retorted: “Wir haben oben davon gehandelt, welchen Reichtum der Psalter für die christliche Kirche darstellt. Davon soll nichts abgebrochen werden. Eine große Zahl von Psalmen und Psalmteilen ist mit Recht im Beten der christlichen Gemeinde, in ihrer Liturgie und im Gebet des einzelnen Christen, lebendig und soll es bleiben. Es würde eine große Verarmung unseres Beten bedeuten, wollten wir auf diese Psalmen verzichten. Aber nicht alle Psalmen oder nicht alle Psalmenworte können für uns zu Worten des Gebetes im Namen Jesu Christi werden. Das Nein, das Gott zum Alten Bunde im Neuen Bunde gesagt hat, darf neben dem Ja nicht überhört werden. Es hieße, den Segen des Neuen Bundes mißachten, wollten wir nicht auch in unserem Beten die neue Stellung der Gemeinde zu Gott beachten, die ihr in Jesus Christus gegeben worden ist.”

⁸⁵ *DBWE* 14:964; *DBW* 14:981. Emphasis original.

How, then, can we who are ourselves guilty and deserve God's wrath then summon down that same wrath on our enemies without this vengeance turning back on us? No, we, we cannot pray this psalm.⁸⁶ But not because we are too good (what a shallow notion, what incredible arrogance!), but because we are too sinful ourselves, too evil! Only those who are themselves completely without guilt can pray thus. This psalm of vengeance is the prayer of the innocent.⁸⁷

And here, Bonhoeffer begins to reveal the way in which Jesus Christ, the Crucified One, is and must be the interpretive key to rightly understanding and appropriating this psalm.

After affirming this psalm as historically Davidic in origin, Bonhoeffer asserts that it is not David's own innocence on display here but the innocence of Jesus Christ, who "is to come" through the line of David.⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer argues, therefore, that it is in this prayer that "Christ's own innocence steps before the world and accuses it. It is not we who accuse but Christ. And when Christ accuses of sin, are not we ourselves then also immediately among the accused?"⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer contends that David has no innocence of his own, no privileged place from which he can call for vengeance upon his enemies without, himself, being implicated in his own prayer. He asserts that David speaks this prayer not in his own voice but in the voice of the fully innocent Christ. This, in fact, is why David can pray this psalm at all, and it is also the reason why the church-community can pray this psalm. Bonhoeffer explains:

It is David who prays this psalm. David himself is not innocent. Yet it pleased God to prepare in David the one who would be called the Son of David, Jesus Christ. David is not to perish because Christ is to come from him. David himself would never have been able to pray this way against his enemies in order to save his own life. We know that David humbly bore all personal abuse. But Christ, and thus the church of God, is in David. Hence his enemies are the enemies of Jesus Christ and of his holy church. This is why David may not be permitted to perish before his enemies. In David, it is

⁸⁶ Important to understanding the perspective on praying this psalm which Bonhoeffer is repudiating is his repetition of the pronoun "we." We—meaning we sinful human beings—we are not permitted to pray this psalm as *our* prayer. As will be explicated, it is only the prayer of the innocent One, Jesus Christ.

⁸⁷ *DBWE* 14:964; *DBW* 14:981.

⁸⁸ *DBWE* 14:965; *DBW* 14:981.

⁸⁹ *DBWE* 14:965; *DBW* 14:982.

Christ's own innocence that is also praying this psalm and with Christ the entire holy church.⁹⁰

By drawing in “the church of God” to this discussion Bonhoeffer reinforces a central presupposition of his hermeneutic while also exposing a unique aspect to his understanding and appropriation of the Psalms as a prayerbook for the church-community. He views the Psalms as, first and foremost, the prayerbook of Jesus Christ. When David makes these prayers his own, he speaks them in Christ and in the voice of Christ. Jesus is the Mediator who brings David's prayer to the Father, and through whom David's prayer is guaranteed an answer. Likewise, when the church-community takes up the words of this prayerbook, we do so also in Christ, who is our Mediator and the guarantor of an answer before the Father. The church-community of today can pray in the same way as David prayed because, like David, we pray in union with Jesus Christ, our Mediator and our Savior. The Psalter is the prayerbook of the church-community only as it is the prayerbook of Jesus Christ who prays with his church-community. Prayed in any way apart from faith in Christ, these prayers are only human words. This conviction is fundamental to Bonhoeffer's defense of the legitimacy and efficacy of this psalm for the needs of the church-community of his day.

In pointing out the temptation to turn the imprecations of this psalm into a means of carrying out one's own vengeance against an enemy, Bonhoeffer places all people *coram Deo*. All humanity is on level ground before the Holy God and Judge, and no one receives special privilege to pray for avenging justice upon the wicked because all are wicked before God. All, in fact, are controlled by Satan, an enemy who is far too strong to overcome. As Bonhoeffer confesses, “All our courage—and be it ever so great—all our bravery of necessity collapse before this enemy. Here we are dealing with the attack of Satan himself, and the matter must be

⁹⁰ *DBWE* 14:964–65; *DBW* 14:981–82.

given over to the only hands that have any power over Satan, namely, God's."⁹¹ This fact calls for the proper disposition of humility and submission for the one who would pray it. For, Bonhoeffer suggests, this psalm is not aimed at acquiring our own form of justice against the wicked. Rather, this psalm—when considered in light of Jesus Christ who alone is innocent enough to give voice to it, and who stands with YHWH who alone retains the right to carry out its request—calls for the releasing of our claim for vengeance against the enemy. It calls for relinquishing this desire, as we submit our own will to the unrelenting rule of the holy and just God.⁹² This call serves as a prelude to the cruciform theology which Bonhoeffer expresses in this sermon:

Those who are intent on avenging themselves do not yet have any idea with whom they are dealing; they are still intent on taking vengeance into their own hands. But those who commend this vengeance to God alone have reached the point where they are willing to suffer and to endure without vengeance, without any thought of avenging themselves, without hatred and without opposition; instead, they are gentle, peaceful, and love their enemies. God's cause has become more important than their own sufferings.⁹³

At the same time Bonhoeffer commends this psalm as consistent with the Christian faith, he is also warning of the pitfalls inherent in misinterpreting the psalm apart from Jesus Christ. Interpreted merely historically, this psalm is likely to be dismissed in the way that J. Fichtner does, as a relic of pre-Christian morality. Interpreted with an eye toward contemporary use, the psalm runs the risk of fostering self-righteousness which ignores one's own wickedness and sin. But interpreted Christologically, that is, in the voice of Jesus Christ and in relation to his atoning sacrifice on the cross, this psalm maintains its inspired place in the biblical canon and serves as a

⁹¹ *DBWE* 14:965; *DBW* 14:982.

⁹² Bonhoeffer builds this argument through reference and allusion to numerous other Scriptural texts. This list, enhanced by *DBWE* editors, includes: Deut 32:35; 2 Sam 24:14; Luke 23:34; Rom 3:23–26; 7:24; 12:19; Gal 6:7; and 2 Thes 2:3–8. See chapter outlines below for a proposed treatment of the way these texts inform Bonhoeffer's interpretation of this psalm.

⁹³ *DBWE* 14:967; *DBW* 14:984–85.

means of aligning the one praying it with God’s view of wickedness and sin—in the world and in every human person—as well as his provision to deal with this wickedness through Jesus Christ, by means of the cross and the final judgment.

Bonhoeffer then turns his attention more closely to the relationship between this psalm and the cross of Christ. Verse 10 [HB 11] paints a scandalous picture of the righteous ones joyfully washing their feet in the blood of the wicked. Although we may want to turn in embarrassment or offense from this picture, as Fichtner suggests, Bonhoeffer strongly disapproves of this reaction:

Anyone who shrinks back in horror from such joy in God’s vengeance and from the blood of the wicked does not yet understand what happened on the cross of Christ. God’s righteous wrath at the wicked has, after all, already come down upon us. The blood of the wicked has already flowed. God’s death sentence over the wicked has already been pronounced. God’s righteousness has been fulfilled. All this happened on the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ died the death of the wicked, struck by God’s wrath and vengeance. His blood is the blood demanded by God’s righteousness for transgressions against his commandments. God’s vengeance has been executed even more horribly than even this psalm can imagine, right here on earth. Christ, the innocent one, died the death of the wicked so that we need not die. Now we stand as the wicked beneath his cross.⁹⁴

What Bonhoeffer does in this sermon is to break through the hard exterior of this psalm to reveal in its center the presence of Jesus Christ.⁹⁵ Jesus Christ, the Innocent One, has become for us the Condemned and “Godless One” by becoming sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). In other words, Jesus Christ is both the One who *prays this psalm*, and the One whom this psalm *prays against*. This reality brings about, for Bonhoeffer, a joyous proclamation:

[A]nd now a virtually incomprehensible riddle is solved: Jesus Christ, the innocent one, prays in the hour in which God’s vengeance is visited upon the wicked on earth, in which our psalm here is fulfilled: Father, forgive them; for they do not know what

⁹⁴ *DBWE* 14:968–69; *DBW* 14:986.

⁹⁵ This image is taken from Luther (*WA* 55¹, 6, 29–34), who commented on the manner with which he approaches difficult biblical texts such as these types of psalms: when “others make a detour and purposely, as it were, avoid Christ, so do they put off approaching him with the text. But I, when I have some text that is like a Nut which is to me as a hard shell, I immediately dash it against the Rock and find the sweetest kernel.”

they are doing. He who bore this vengeance, he alone is permitted to ask that the wicked be forgiven, for he alone freed us from God's wrath and vengeance, bringing forgiveness to his enemies, and no one prior to him was permitted to pray this way. He alone is permitted. When we look at him, the Crucified, we recognize God's true, living wrath on us, the wicked, and in that very same moment we also recognize our liberation from this wrath, and we hear: Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.⁹⁶

The same verse (Lk 23:34) which Fichtner cited to argue for the rejection of these types of psalms by the church-community today becomes a central text in Bonhoeffer's defense of their proper Christological interpretation and appropriation today. Lk 23:34 is the exegetical basis for viewing Jesus Christ the Crucified One as the one who is speaking in Ps 58.

At this point, Bonhoeffer can bring a fitting conclusion to the questions he raises in the opening lines of this sermon about whether (or, rather, how) the church-community can properly pray this psalm:

Hence from this psalm of vengeance there emerges the image of the bleeding Savior who died for the wicked, struck by God's vengeance that we might be saved.... In the midst of [the] raging [of this world] ... Christ prays this psalm for us in a vicarious representative fashion. He accuses the wicked, summoning God's vengeance and righteousness down upon them, and offering himself on the cross for the sake of the wicked with his own innocent suffering.... And now we pray along with this psalm, in humble gratitude for the cross of Christ having saved us from wrath, with the ardent petition that God bring all our enemies to the cross of Christ and grant them mercy, with fierce yearning that the day might soon come when Christ visibly triumphs over all his enemies and establishes his kingdom. Thus have we learned to pray this psalm. Amen.⁹⁷

With this conclusion Bonhoeffer stays consistent with his belief that, first, the Psalms (all of them) have been given to the church-community so that they might pray them; and, second, that the crucified Christ is the interpretive key that allows the church-community to take the whole Psalter—even the psalms of vengeance—on its lips in prayer.

⁹⁶ *DBWE* 14:968–69; *DBW* 14:986–87. Important to note in this quote is how Bonhoeffer makes use of Luke 23:34. J. Fichtner used this verse to argue against the acceptance of this psalm as an appropriate prayer for the church-community, which Bonhoeffer used it to demonstrate its proper place in a Christological interpretation of this psalm.

⁹⁷ *DBWE* 14:969–70; *DBW* 14:987–88.

It is my contention that Bonhoeffer's sermon on this psalm most poignantly exemplifies his unique exegetical approach toward the Psalms. In response to a pressing need in the church-community, he turns to this psalm which seems to express the emotions and concerns of his community to the threats which surround them. He considers the appropriate, faith-filled way for the church-community to respond to such threats. Recognizing in David's setting a context analogous to his own, he asks the question, *are we to pray in this way this way?* "Is this terrible psalm of vengeance really our prayer?"⁹⁸ His answer is a resounding "yes," but only by the merits of Jesus Christ. In praying this psalm, the church-community joins their voice to Christ's voice. In doing so they are assured that God will answer their prayer, which is also the prayer of his one and only Son. As the church-community entrusts itself to the will of God in prayer, they are simultaneously released from the need to carry out their own form of vengeance against their enemy; this, they yield to God and his wisdom. Praying in union with Christ, they increasingly learn to live by faith and to trust in the promise of God through Jesus Christ, "free from any desire for vengeance" and "from all hatred, ... certain that all things will serve the joy of the righteous."⁹⁹

Publication: Prayerbook of the Bible (1940)

A final work deserving attention in this analysis of Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms is his introduction to the Psalter, entitled *Prayerbook of the Bible*.¹⁰⁰ Even though *Prayerbook* is relatively short in length,¹⁰¹ and only offers introductory comments on the nature of the Psalms and the proper interpretation of them, it should nonetheless be

⁹⁸ *DBWE* 14:964; *DBW* 14:981.

⁹⁹ *DBWE* 14:967, 970; *DBW* 14:985, 988.

¹⁰⁰ *DBWE* 5:141–81; *DBW* 5:107–31, 172–75.

¹⁰¹ *DBW* published the actual text of Bonhoeffer's *Prayerbook* in 25 pages. *DBWE* is 22 pages in length.

considered Bonhoeffer's most comprehensive work on the Psalms. As the last of all his publications, Bonhoeffer's writing in *Prayerbook* touches on many themes he previously addressed in "Christus in den Psalmen" and in his sermon on Ps 58. What *is* new, however, is the conciseness with which he offers his Christological interpretation on the breadth of types and themes represented in the whole Psalter.

In his comments, Bonhoeffer assumes the acceptability of traditional form-critical genre categorization of the Psalms, although he gives them his own thematic designations:

We will organize the subject matter of the psalm—prayers in the following way: creation, law, the history of salvation, the Messiah, the church, life, suffering, guilt, enemies, the end. It would not be difficult to arrange all of these according to the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, and thus to show how the Psalter is entirely taken up into the prayer of Jesus. But in order not to anticipate the result of our observations, we want to retain the division taken from the Psalms themselves.¹⁰²

As this introductory statement reveals, Bonhoeffer once again unites his interpretation of the Psalms with his presupposition that they have been given so that the church-community might pray them.¹⁰³ This, in fact, is Bonhoeffer's expressed "end-goal" for *Prayerbook*. He writes, "We have taken this brief journey through the Psalter in order to learn to pray better some of the psalms.... [W]hat alone is important is that we begin anew with confidence and love to pray the Psalms in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁰⁴

This conviction is exegetically rooted in Lk 11:1–4 where Jesus gave his disciples the Lord's Prayer. It was Bonhoeffer's opinion that Jesus, who in his incarnation prayed the Psalms consistently, gave the disciples the Lord's Prayer by drawing from the prayers and subject-matter

¹⁰² *DBWE* 5:162; *DBW* 5:117.

¹⁰³ *DBWE* 5:155–58; *DBW* 5:107–10. Brian Brock, *Singing*, 73, assesses that, in this regard, "Bonhoeffer follows Luther in understanding the book [of Psalms] as a 'children's primer' for learning to talk to God, in assuming that only one book in the Bible is devoted to training our speech and affections toward God."

¹⁰⁴ *DBWE* 5:177; *DBW* 5:131–32. Kelly, Introduction (*DBWE* 5:154): "Bonhoeffer's ultimate aim in writing the book [is] to assist people to pray the Psalms in union with Jesus Christ."

of the Psalter. Müller and Schönherr clarify the origins of this Psalter-Lord's Prayer theory in Bonhoeffer's understanding:

At issue in the prayers of the Psalms is the question of what is distinctly Christian in prayer. In this regard, the remark of Friedrich Christoph Öttinger (1702–1782), that basically the Psalter contains nothing other than the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer, was key to Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Psalms. Of course, for Bonhoeffer this meant not only that the Psalter is derived from Christ, but also the converse, namely, that the Psalter interprets the Christ-event.¹⁰⁵

Jesus says in Mt 6:7 that the prayer of his disciples ought to be distinguished from the overly verbose and vain babbling of the pagans. Thus Jesus gives them a pattern to follow, which, Bonhoeffer avers, is modeled after Jesus's own prayer of the Psalter. Müller and Schönherr then go on to quote Bonhoeffer from *Life Together* where he writes: "In all our praying there remains only the prayer of Jesus Christ, which has the promise of fulfillment and frees us from the vain repetitions of heathen. The more deeply we grow into the Psalms, the more often we have prayed them as our own, the more simple and rewarding will our prayer become."¹⁰⁶

The bulk of *Prayerbook* contains Bonhoeffer's summary of the interpretation and significance of each of the "subject matters" covered within psalms. Contained in each thematic section is an application of the salvific work of Jesus to a proper interpretation and praying of the Psalter. The following is an overview of each thematic section.

Creation

On psalms which proclaim God as "creator of heaven and earth" (e.g., Pss 8, 19, 29, 104),

Bonhoeffer writes:

¹⁰⁵ Müller and Schönherr, "Editors' Afterword to the German Edition" (*DBWE* 5:181; *DBW* 5:175). The fact that this was a determinative presupposition for Bonhoeffer is reflected in the fact that he not only made this statement at the end of *Prayerbook*, but he also wrote nearly the exact same words in his introduction (*DBWE* 5:162; *DBW* 5:117). Additionally, Bonhoeffer also references Öttinger by name in *Life Together* (*DBWE* 5:58; *DBW* 5:42–43).

¹⁰⁶ *DBWE* 5:58; *DBW* 5:43.

Because God has spoken to us, because God's name has been revealed to us, we can believe in God as the creator. Otherwise we could not know God. The creation is a picture of the power and the faithfulness of God, demonstrated to us in God's revelation in Jesus Christ. We worship the creator, revealed to us as redeemer.¹⁰⁷

Bonhoeffer ties the revelation of God's work in creation to the revelation of God's work in salvation through Jesus Christ. This is clear not only from his comments here, but it is also evident in the lectures he gave as an adjunct professor at Berlin University (winter 1932–1933), entitled *Schöpfung und Fall* and subtitled “A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3.”¹⁰⁸ In the opening moments of this lecture Bonhoeffer states,

[T]he God of creation, of the utter beginning, is the God of the resurrection. The world exists from the beginning in the sign of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Indeed it is because we know of the resurrection that we know of God's creation in the beginning, of God's creating out of nothing. The dead Jesus Christ of Good Friday and the resurrected κύριος [*kurios*, Lord] of Easter Sunday—that is creation out of nothing, creation from the beginning.¹⁰⁹

For Bonhoeffer, any talk in the psalms of God's relationship to his creation “provide guidance for the people of God by which they are to find and honor the creator of the world in the grace of salvation that they have experienced.”¹¹⁰ This “grace of salvation” is found in Jesus Christ.

Law

In those psalms which “in a special way make the law of God the object of thanksgiving, praise, and petition” (i.e., Pss 1, 19, 119), Bonhoeffer defines “law” as “the entire redemptive act of God and direction for a new life in obedience” which serves as the foundation of the giving of God's commands.¹¹¹ Delight in God's law cannot be experienced apart from “the great

¹⁰⁷ *DBWE* 5:163; *DBW* 5:117.

¹⁰⁸ *DBWE* 3; *DBW* 3.

¹⁰⁹ *DBWE* 3:34–35; *DBW* 3:33.

¹¹⁰ *DBWE* 5:164; *DBW* 5:118.

¹¹¹ *DBWE* 5:164; *DBW* 5:118.

transformation that comes through Jesus Christ.”¹¹² Therefore, as Bonhoeffer suggests, it is because of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus that “We affirm that we hold [God’s law] dear, and we ask that we continue to be preserved blameless in it.”¹¹³ In addition to Jesus’s role in imparting a love for the law of God—a major emphasis in the “law” or *torah* psalms—we are also dependent on Jesus for the ability to obey God’s law.

The History of Salvation

In some psalms under this heading—Bonhoeffer specifically mentions Ps 78—God is not directly addressed or mentioned. Thus, how can these psalms be considered prayers? Or, “How ought we to pray these psalms?”¹¹⁴ Bonhoeffer asserts that as these psalms remind us of “the history of the people of God on earth, the electing grace and faithfulness of God and the faithlessness and ingratitude of God’s people,”¹¹⁵ they consequently prompt us to give thanks, praise, express commitment, make petitions, and confess sin. He writes, “We pray these psalms when we look upon everything that God once did for God’s people as having been done for us” and “when we finally see the entire history of God’s people with their God fulfilled in Jesus Christ.”¹¹⁶ The retelling of the history of Israel’s salvation through the prayers of the Psalter moves the church-community to think of the ultimate source and victor of salvation, Jesus Christ.

Messiah

Under the heading of “Messiah psalms” Bonhoeffer lists psalms such as Pss 22 and 69, which he says are traditionally understood in the church as “the psalms of the passion of

¹¹² *DBWE* 5:164; *DBW* 5:118.

¹¹³ *DBWE* 5:164; *DBW* 5:119.

¹¹⁴ *DBWE* 5:165; *DBW* 5:119.

¹¹⁵ *DBWE* 5:165; *DBW* 5:119.

¹¹⁶ *DBWE* 5:165; *DBW* 5:119–20.

Christ.”¹¹⁷ When we pray Ps 22, “we always hear Jesus Christ praying with us” in our suffering.¹¹⁸ As Bonhoeffer writes, “We can pray this psalm only in community with Jesus Christ as those who have participated in the suffering of Christ. We pray this psalm not out of our random personal suffering, but out of the suffering of Christ that has also come upon us.”¹¹⁹ The prayers for deliverance and victory in psalms such as Ps 72 find their fulfillment not in a human king but in the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true king.¹²⁰

The Church

Bonhoeffer categorizes Pss 27, 42, 46, 48, 63, 81, 84, and 87 (among others) as psalms of the church, seeing in their references to Mt. Zion and to the temple a picture of “the church of God in all the world, where God always dwells with the people of God in word and sacrament.”¹²¹ These psalms reminds us that

The gracious God who is present in Christ to the congregation is the fulfillment of all thanksgiving, all joy and yearning in the Psalms. As Jesus, in whom God truly dwells, longed for community with God because he had become human like us (Lk. 2:49), so he prays with us for the fullness of God’s nearness and presence with those are his.¹²² As we express longing and give thanks for God’s nearness, we also praise God who has given us access to his presence through Jesus Christ.

Life

Under a general heading of “Life” Bonhoeffer lists many psalms which align with the

¹¹⁷ *DBWE* 5:166; *DBW* 5:120.

¹¹⁸ *DBWE* 5:166; *DBW* 5:120.

¹¹⁹ *DBWE* 5:166; *DBW* 5:120.

¹²⁰ *DBWE* 5:166; *DBW* 5:120. Underneath this subject heading Bonhoeffer also includes Ps 45 (*DBWE* 5:167; *DBW* 5:121) and aligns his interpretation with premodern scholars such as St. John Chrysostom: “The much debated Ps 45 speaks about love for the messianic king, about his beauty, his wealth, his power. At her marriage to this king the bride is to forget her people and her father’s house (v. 11 [10]) and swear allegiance to the king. For him alone she is to adorn herself and come to him with joy. That is the song and prayer of the love between Jesus, the king, and his church, which belongs to him.”

¹²¹ *DBWE* 5:167; *DBW* 5:122.

¹²² *DBWE* 5:167; *DBW* 5:122.

fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer, among which he includes portions of Pss 37, 63, 73, and 103. These psalms express concern for physical needs and provision, a "desire which is not set aside by the cross of Jesus Christ, but is established all the more."¹²³ Just as Jesus had need for daily provision and protection, so his church-community places these psalm-prayers on their lips. Like Jesus and the psalmists, they wait patiently for God to answer as they "hold fast to the knowledge that God's goodness is better than life (Ps. 63:4 [3], 73:25f)."¹²⁴ As Bonhoeffer concludes in this section:

So God wants to make us ready, finally, through the loss of all earthly goods in death, to obtain eternal life. For the sake of Jesus Christ alone, and at his bidding, we may pray for the good things of life, and for the sake of Christ we should also do it with confidence. But when we receive what we need, then we should not stop thanking God from the heart for being so friendly to us for the sake of Jesus Christ.¹²⁵

Jesus is our example in these psalm-prayers, as one demonstrated complete trust in God and who taught us to pray, "give us this day our daily bread."

Suffering

This subject matter involves a number of psalms including Pss 13, 31, 35, 41, 44, 54, and 55. Bonhoeffer acknowledges the prominence of this topic in the Psalms by starting with a quote from Luther: "Where do you find more pitiful, miserable words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There you see into the heart of all the saints as into death, even as into hell. How sad and dark it is there in every wretched corner of the wrath of God."¹²⁶ Bonhoeffer points to these psalms as teachers which show the Christian "how to come before God in a proper way in

¹²³ *DBWE* 5:168; *DBW* 5:123.

¹²⁴ *DBWE* 5:169; *DBW* 5:123.

¹²⁵ *DBWE* 5:169; *DBW* 5:123–24.

¹²⁶ *DBWE* 5:169; *DBW* 5:124.

the various sufferings that the world brings upon us.”¹²⁷

Even as he promotes these psalms as useful in times of personal suffering he also elevates their focus: “No single human being can pray the psalms of lamentation out of his or her own experience. Spread out before us here is the anguish of the entire Christian community throughout all times, as Jesus Christ alone has wholly experienced it.”¹²⁸ In this statement he reiterates his contention from *Life Together* that praying the Psalms teaches the church-community how to pray as a community by drawing our attention to needs that others outside my immediate context may have.¹²⁹ He also focuses our eyes on Jesus Christ, who has experienced the greatest suffering of all as he bore the sins of all humanity on the cross.

Bonhoeffer brings out two important lessons that these psalms aim to teach. The first lesson is that we are to bring all our suffering before God: “even in the deepest hopelessness, God alone remains the one addressed.”¹³⁰ And, the second lesson concerns our expectations for resolution: “There is no theoretical answer to all [the] questions [raised] in the Psalms any more than in the New Testament. The only real answer is Jesus Christ.”¹³¹ This is an encouragement toward faith and trust in the power and wisdom of God, and a reminder that,

Jesus Christ is not only the goal of our prayer; he himself is also with us in our prayer. He, who bore every affliction and brought it before God, prayed in God’s name for our sake: “Not what I want, but what you want.” For our sake he cried out on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Now we know that there is no longer any suffering on earth in which

¹²⁷ *DBWE* 5:169; *DBW* 5:124.

¹²⁸ *DBWE* 5:169; *DBW* 5:124.

¹²⁹ *DBWE* 5:57; *DBW* 5:42.

¹³⁰ *DBWE* 5:170; *DBW* 5:124.

¹³¹ *DBWE* 5:170; *DBW* 5:125.

Christ, our only helper, is not with us, suffering and praying with us.¹³²

To pray the psalms through faith in Christ in times of suffering is to take refuge in Christ through the words of the psalms, which are also the words Christ prayed. To be united in suffering with Jesus is also to be united in his comfort and salvation.

Guilt

Bonhoeffer deals with the subject matter of guilt in the Psalms in two ways. He recognizes the prayers of repentance in what have been traditionally categorized as the “penitential psalms” (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). These psalm-prayers “help us in the confession of guilt” and “turn our entire trust to the forgiving grace of God.”¹³³ Yet Bonhoeffer also brings to light a misguided tendency in the church to remain uncertain of our forgiveness in Jesus Christ, thus leading us to wallow in guilt and to doubt God’s ability to forgive and cleanse from sin. Bonhoeffer writes, “Christian prayer is diminished and endangered when it revolves exclusively around the forgiveness of sins. There is such a thing as confidently leaving sin behind for the sake of Jesus Christ.”¹³⁴ He continues,

Here it is clear that believing Christians have something to say not only about their guilt, but also something equally important about their innocence and righteousness. To have faith as a Christian means that, through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, the Christian has become entirely innocent and righteous in God’s eyes—that “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).¹³⁵

Jesus prays these psalms not out of his own sin or guilt, but as one who has “become sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21), taken upon himself the sin of all humanity. As the church-community prays these

¹³² *DBWE* 5:170; *DBW* 5:125.

¹³³ *DBWE* 5:171; *DBW* 5:126.

¹³⁴ *DBWE* 5:171; *DBW* 5:126.

¹³⁵ *DBWE* 5:172; *DBW* 5:127

psalms, they find appropriate words to speak of and confess their sin, while at the same time, receiving confidence in their innocence on the basis of “the merit of Jesus Christ.”¹³⁶

Enemies

Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of psalms which fall under the subject heading of enemies—known also as “psalms of vengeance” or “psalms of imprecation”—does not need much elaboration, as his treatment is completely consistent with what he presented in his sermon on Ps 58 (see above). Here, he again acknowledges the difficulty of these psalms for the church-community attempting to pray them. Yet he maintains his conviction that it is not appropriate to dismiss them as merely representative of “the so-called preliminary religious stage [religiöse Vorstufe]” of Christianity and thus not appropriate for New Testament believers.¹³⁷ His opinion is clearly stated:

So the psalm of vengeance leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God that forgives enemies.... I pray the psalm of wrath in the certainty of its wonderful fulfillment; I leave the vengeance in God’s hands and pray for the carrying out of God’s justice to all enemies. I know that God has remained true and has secured justice in wrathful judgment on the cross, and that this wrath has become grace and joy for us.¹³⁸

In praying the “enemy” psalms, the church-community prays a prayer appropriate for both the Old Testament and the New Testament believer. They are not outdated in their theological expression, but are only given clarity through the crucified Jesus.

The End

Under this final subject heading Bonhoeffer lists those psalms which speak of “Life in

¹³⁶ *DBWE* 5:172; *DBW* 5:127.

¹³⁷ *DBWE* 5:174; *DBW* 5:129.

¹³⁸ *DBWE* 5:175; *DBW* 5:130.

community with the God of revelation, the final victory of God in the world, and the establishment of the messianic kingdom”—all subjects, he maintains, equally present in the Old and the New Testaments.¹³⁹ The Psalms guide the praying church-community to lift its gaze beyond this life and to embrace the eschatological vision of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ where “death will not triumph, but life will triumph in the power of God.”¹⁴⁰ Making references to psalms which speak of life eternal with God, such as Ps 16:9; 49:15 [16]; 56:13 [14]; 73:24; and 118:15, Bonhoeffer states, “We find this life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we pray for it now and forever.”¹⁴¹

Conclusion

A Summary of Bonhoeffer’s Mature Christological Interpretation of the Psalms

The history of interpretation of the Psalms has produced numerous exegetical strategies for discerning the Christological meaning and significance of the Psalms for the church-community. As I have aimed to demonstrate in this chapter, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stands in this stream as one who employs previously defined exegetical approaches *en route* to reaching an understanding of Christological exegesis which, in certain key aspects, is new in the tradition. The innovative move in Bonhoeffer’s approach originates in the way he frames his interpretation of the Psalms within the two pillars of the Psalms’ relationship to the spiritual practice of prayer and to Jesus Christ the crucified. The Psalms, in Bonhoeffer’s understanding, are wholly related to Jesus Christ. He believes Jesus prayed the Psalms in his incarnation and, in doing so, makes them his own prayerbook. This conviction is grounded exegetically for Bonhoeffer, first, in the Gospel’s testimony to Jesus’s use of the Psalms from the cross (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34; Lk 23:46). It is

¹³⁹ *DBWE* 5:176; *DBW* 5:131.

¹⁴⁰ *DBWE* 5:176; *DBW* 5:131.

¹⁴¹ *DBWE* 5:176; *DBW* 5:131.

further supported by Bonhoeffer's understanding, via Friedrich Christoph Öttinger, of the relationship between the Lord's Prayer and the Psalter, which Jesus relied on when giving a pattern for prayer to his disciples (Lk 11:1–4). Based on Öttinger's commentary, when Jesus's disciples asked him to teach them to pray, Jesus gave them a pattern which reflected the way he prayed—namely, by means of the prayerbook of the Bible, the Psalms. A third exegetical piece of evidence Bonhoeffer relied on is Jesus's declaration in Lk 24:44 that the Psalms, along with the Law and the Prophets, all point to him and his life, death, and resurrection. Upon this arguably delicate exegetical foundation, Bonhoeffer then builds a hermeneutical framework for his interpretation of the Psalms.

His basic conviction is that the Psalter, which is the revealed Word of God, was Jesus's own prayerbook in his incarnation. In praying the Psalms in his humanity Jesus affirmed these prayers to be both divinely inspired words *and* human words of praise and petition. Not one psalm, in Bonhoeffer's opinion, is excluded from use by Jesus. Jesus, who is the head of the church (Eph 5:23; Col 1:18) pass on to his church his own prayerbook, so ensuring that they would learn not only *how* and *what* to pray from it, but that, when they do pray these prayers together, they would have the knowledge that Jesus himself prays with them. This cooperation in prayer, Bonhoeffer argues, continues for the church-community as Jesus maintains his ministry of intercession by praying the Psalms in eternity as our High Priest before the throne of God the Father.¹⁴² The power for the church-community in understanding the prayers of the Psalter this way—as fundamentally divine prayers which were and are prayed by Jesus, the Son of God—is

¹⁴² Fiedrowicz, "General Introduction," 53: "Augustine was convinced that it was the glorified Christ who made use of the words of the psalms in order to appear before the Father on our behalf. His promise to remain with his Church (see Mt 28:20), the identification of the body with Christ himself (see 1 Cor 12:2), and finally the Pauline concepts of the filling-up of the sufferings of Christ (see Col 1:24) and of his life in the individual believer (see Gal 2:20) all indicated that even though the Lord is glorified his passion goes on (*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*), and therefore so does his praying of the psalms of petition in the name of his body."

that it ensures the reception of their own prayers by God the Father, and it gives them confidence that their prayers will be answered in the same manner that God answered these prayers when spoken by Jesus Christ. For Bonhoeffer, to pray the Psalms in the church-community as the prayerbook of the Bible is to pray them as the prayerbook of Christ, who speaks in them as the Crucified One. Our prayers are Jesus's prayers; the answers we receive come to us in the same way that they came to him. As we express our deepest needs and emotions in the prayers of the Psalms, we are united as the *sanctorum communio* with Jesus in his own suffering and death, as well as in the sure hope of his resurrection.

Toward a Clearer Definition of Bonhoeffer's Christological Interpretation of the Psalms

At this point, it should be noted that the Christological shape of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms is not without need of an apologetic. He, at times, makes his Christological move prophetically, recognizing in David's prayer the prayer of the Messiah who was "in David's loins." At other times Bonhoeffer's interpretation exhibits characteristics of a typological reading. Directly or indirectly—whether through the influence of Augustine, monastic tradition, or, more likely, Luther¹⁴³—Bonhoeffer often exhibit a prosopological or *totus Christus* hermeneutic in his reading of the Psalms. He emphasizes Jesus's praying the Psalms in his incarnation for his own needs, yet he also alludes to Jesus's representative use of the Psalter's prayers, praying on behalf of all believers. To this Bonhoeffer also adds the element of Jesus's eternal intercession as High Priest before the throne of God. All of this raises questions as to the basis, priority, and exegetical and doctrinal clarity of these conclusions, not to mention the

¹⁴³ According to Hendrix, *Ecclesia in Via*, 177, Luther exhibits a prosopological reading of Ps 114 in his *Dictata* when he writes that "whatever Christ the Head did and suffered ... signifies spiritually how the *fides Christi* acts and suffers in his *fideles* from sin."

soundness of their formulation and consistency.¹⁴⁴

In general terms, I believe Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms can be best situated within the theological and figural realms. The theological motivation for his interpretive approach is clear, as he aims to aid the church in its faith development and spiritual renewal through meditation on and use of the Scriptural prayers of the Psalms. The tendency of historical-critical scholarship to demur this type of spiritual, faith-focused emphasis and, simultaneously, to diminish the centrality of Jesus Christ in its interpretation of these Old Testament texts served to spur Bonhoeffer on toward an exploration of this perspective. Bonhoeffer situated Jesus at the center of his hermeneutic of the Psalms—perhaps, in part, as a reaction against the refusal to consider such a move by his contemporaries—and employed the spiritual discipline of prayer as the vehicle through which Jesus Christ and the Psalms are carried to the church-community, and which, in turn, unites the *sanctorum communio* to God through Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer's Christological reading of the Psalms is not recognizably allegorical, nor traditionally typological, but more figural in nature. Figural interpretation of Scripture is variously defined and practiced.¹⁴⁵ It has recently been treated by John David Dawson who said of its use in interpreting the Old Testament that figural reading is a form of “Christian reading that express[es] Christianity's relation to Judaism while respecting the independent religious identity of Jews, and, more broadly, the diverse identities of all human beings.”¹⁴⁶ William M.

¹⁴⁴ Further discussion on these points will be taken up in chapter six, in my evaluation of Bonhoeffer's contributions to the history of interpretation of the Psalms.

¹⁴⁵ For a more thorough treatment of this interpretative method see John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*; Peter W. Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen,” *J ECS* 16 (2008): 283–317.

¹⁴⁶ Dawson, *Figural Reading*, 3. This preliminary definition of the characteristics of a figural reading of the Old Testament certainly resonates with Bonhoeffer's growing enthusiasm for the Old Testament, along with his

Wright IV suggests that figural reading falls in between allegory and typology and “denote[s] a range of more-than-literal reading practices in which the biblical text is read in light of the mystery of Christ.”¹⁴⁷ In reflecting on the interaction between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:29–35, Dawson affirms Phillip’s reading of Is 53 and says that, in Phillip’s approach, “[t]he prophetic meaning of the Old Testament is thereby presented as *discovered* rather than imposed. The prophet Isaiah speaks about someone, and it is the figural reader’s task to discover who it might be.”¹⁴⁸

From Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde era onward, his use of the Old Testament increases in frequency,¹⁴⁹ and the characteristics of his reading lean toward this type of figural reading, where he recognizes the “mystery of Christ” crucified in the text. It may be argued how much he successfully preserves the text’s original context and its connection to Judaism, but he most certainly maintains a consistent concern for the Psalms’ theological and analogical relationship to his own contemporary experiences. Bonhoeffer’s approach validates the Psalter’s prayers as divine words which intersect in a timeless way with the experiences of the church-community in every age. They are elevated in meaning by the fact that Jesus Christ prayed them and, in doing so, gave them a cruciform shape which unites those praying them today in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With this summary, we are now situated to look at two later examples of Bonhoeffer’s maturing and evolving Christological interpretation of the Psalms: his verse-by-verse commentary on Ps 119:1–21 (1940), and his various uses of the Psalms that

passionate protest against the Nazi program to exterminate the Jews.

¹⁴⁷ William M. Wright IV, “Hearing the Shepherd’s Voice: The *παρομιία* of the Good Shepherd Discourse and Augustine’s Figural Reading,” *JTI* 6, no. 1 (2012): 98.

¹⁴⁸ Dawson, *Figural Reading*, 5. Emphasis added.

¹⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer affirms this pattern of increased attention upon the Old Testament in a letter written from prison to Bethge on Dec 5, 1943 (*DBWE* 8:213; *DBW* 8:226): “By the way, I notice more and more how much I am thinking and perceiving things in line with the Old Testament; thus in recent months I have been reading much more the Old than the New Testament.”

found in his letters and papers from prison (1943–1945).

CHAPTER FOUR

CHRISTOLOGICAL EXEGESIS IN PRACTICE: AN ANALYSIS OF BONHOEFFER'S PARTIAL COMMENTARY ON PSALM 119

Introduction

In chapter two, I described Bonhoeffer's monastery visits in the spring of 1935 as one of the major events that brought about change in Bonhoeffer's interpretation and valuation of the Psalter. This exposure, in particular his visit to the Anglican monastic community at Mirfield, presented Bonhoeffer with a model of interaction with the Psalms that was immersed in prayer and focused on Jesus Christ. Following those visits, Ps 119, a psalm prayed daily at Mirfield, became for Bonhoeffer *the psalm* of greatest interest and a psalm that he referred to more than to any other psalm in the years to follow.¹ As Dirk Schulz observes, exegetical work on this psalm during the late 1930's became a new passion for Bonhoeffer:

In [Bonhoeffer's] exegetical work, the Psalms acquired an even greater significance than had already been the case in Finkenwalde. The small piece *The Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*, published in 1940, probably represents the immediate results of these psalm studies, studies for which Bonhoeffer drew on his own experience with the Psalms during years of daily devotional study. Indeed, Bonhoeffer now viewed the interpretation of Psalm 119 in particular as the "climax of his theological life."²

Schulz goes on to add that this prolonged reflection on Ps 119 can most likely be credited with sparking many new insights for Bonhoeffer including his developing views on "discipleship in the Old Testament" and his "search for an appropriate biblical-Reformational understanding of

¹ Edwin Robertson in Bonhoeffer, *Meditations*, 55.

² Dirk Schulz, "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition" (*DBWE* 15:569; *DBW* 15:585).

the ‘law.’”³ Schulz also points to this psalm’s influence on Bonhoeffer’s “increasingly clear assessment of the ‘natural’ (as he later called it in the *Ethics* fragments) and his ongoing turn toward the ‘profound this-worldliness of Christianity.’”⁴ Although Bonhoeffer’s commentary on Ps 119 would never reach publication nor even completion, it may still be argued that his work on this psalm influenced him personally and theologically throughout the rest of his life.

In the previous chapter I offered an analysis of Bonhoeffer’s Christological exegesis of the Psalms based on his writings from 1935–1940, which included the time of his leadership at the Confessing Church Preacher’s Seminary in Finkenwalde (1935–1937). This analysis revealed a two-pronged hermeneutical approach toward the Psalter, expressed through an emphasis on the relationship of prayer and of Jesus Christ to the Psalms. In this current chapter I will advance this study through an examination of Bonhoeffer’s most unique exegetical document on the Psalms, his partial commentary on Ps 119.⁵ This chapter supports the overall purpose of this dissertation, which is to define and explicate Bonhoeffer’s unique contribution to the Christological exegesis of the Psalms in a way which other scholars have not. To properly situate this particular study on Bonhoeffer’s commentary, I will first survey the uses of Ps 119 by Bonhoeffer *prior to its*

³ *DBWE* 15:569; *DBW* 15:585–86. Schulz does not offer any more description of what he means by the phrase, “an appropriate biblical-Reformational use of ‘the law’” or how, exactly, Bonhoeffer’s study of the Ps 119 informed this understanding. He does, however, mention the fact that Bonhoeffer preceded the writing of this commentary by the writing of *Discipleship* (1937) and *Prayerbook* (1940). This may shed light on the basic understanding with which Bonhoeffer was working in regards to the purpose and function of the biblical law: it was not a means of salvation or self-justification, but a reflection of the character of God, and thereby revered within the church-community as a way to demonstrate God’s loving care for his creation, even when adherence might put the church-community in harm’s way or, in the case of Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church, at odds with the State.

⁴ Schulz, “Editor’s Afterword” (*DBWE* 15:569; *DBW* 15:585–86). John W. de Gruchy, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition” (*DBWE* 8:24–25), even points to Bonhoeffer’s “daily meditation on passages from the Old Testament (notably the Psalms and the Song of Songs)” as a primary impetus for Bonhoeffer’s prison-based “theological letters” which contained his musing on a “nonreligious” interpretation of Christian faith, “religionless Christianity,” and the question, “who [is] Jesus Christ actually for us, today.”

⁵ *DBWE* 15:496–528; *DBW* 15:499–537. This commentary covers verses 1–21 of Ps 119—ending abruptly in the middle of a sentence—and was not published but was preserved from handwritten documents in Bonhoeffer’s collected works.

writing. This data will shed light on the evolution of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of Ps 119, demonstrating the effect of his 1935 monastery visits while also providing evidence for the claim that this psalm held a prominent place in Bonhoeffer's later exegetical and theological labors. I will also provide, in brief summary form, a picture of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of this psalm from these early uses. Following this survey, I will then examine Bonhoeffer's actual commentary. In my analysis of this document, I will give special attention to the development, evolution, and application of Bonhoeffer's two-part hermeneutic of the Psalms proposed in chapter three.

Bonhoeffer's Use of Psalm 119 in Documents Prior to the 1940 Commentary

Bethge has keenly summarized the evolution of Bonhoeffer's evaluation of Ps 119 from Bonhoeffer's earliest academic exposure to his later personal and pastoral usage by observing that "At the university [Bonhoeffer] had learned that [Ps 119] was the most boring of the psalms; now he regarded its interpretation as the climax of his theological life."⁶ In *Prayerbook* (1940), Bonhoeffer would say in his own words: "We recognize, then, that the apparent repetitions [in this psalm] are in fact always new variations on one theme, the love of God's word. As this love can have no end, so also the words that confess it can have no end. They want to accompany us through all of life, and in their simplicity they become the prayer of the child, the adult, and the elderly."⁷ Bonhoeffer lauds Ps 119 as a psalm which guides the believer through all the stages of life. In fact, this seems to be a foundational framework for his interpretation of Ps 119 in the years leading up to the writing of his partial commentary. Bonhoeffer sees in Ps 119 a depiction of the life of Christian discipleship, which addresses our needs and expresses our struggles, all

⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 667.

⁷ *DBWE* 5:165; *DBW* 5:119.

the while keeping us united in faith and obedience to God and his word through Scripture devotion and prayer.

Bonhoeffer's Use of Psalm 119 Between 1932–1940

Numerous scholars have made reference to Bonhoeffer's increased use of Ps 119 after his 1935 monastery visits.⁸ However, none have undertaken a close examination of these uses and what they reveal about Bonhoeffer's evolving Christological interpretation of the Psalms or of his understanding of Ps 119, in specific.⁹ Altogether Bonhoeffer cites or references Ps 119 over thirty times in twenty-two different documents. Table 4.1 lists these uses, according to their appearance in his collected works, between July 1932 (his first recorded use) and the early months of 1940 (the time of the writing of his partial commentary). This table lists each reference of Ps 119 along with the date of its usage, the type of writing in which the usage occurred, and its specific *DBWE/DBW* location.

The uses listed in Table 4.1 fall into two broad categories. The first category contains those uses of Ps 119 which occur in Bonhoeffer's own writings. This is by far the largest group. The second category (marked by *italics*) contains three uses which do not occur in Bonhoeffer's own writing but are rather mentioned within the *DBWE* editor's footnotes. These three uses are tied to two different Bonhoeffer sources and, given the information provided by the editor, can be sufficiently proven to have been actually cited by Bonhoeffer even though we do not have evidence from any extant document from Bonhoeffer in his own hand. The first of these two

⁸ Robertson in Bonhoeffer, *Meditations*, 55; Brock, *Singing*, 74; Pless, "Bonhoeffer on Psalm 119," 228; Miller, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the Psalms," 276.

⁹ Two authors who mention this increased usage of Ps 119 by Bonhoeffer are Pless, "Bonhoeffer on Psalm 119," and Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God*. The nature of their respective works does not allow for an investigation of the evidence of such a statement. They merely cite it on the basis of previous research and then proceed to their intended topic. See, for example, Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian Contemporary*; trans. Eric Mosbacher, et. al. (London: Collins, 1970).

documents is the student notes from a Berlin University lecture by Bonhoeffer from the winter of 1932–1933. The second document is a teaching outline by Bonhoeffer from Finkenwalde utilized during the Apr–Aug 1936 session. I have limited the inclusion of these types of footnote references to three because they are the only ones that can be adequately substantiated as having actually been cited by Bonhoeffer. All others—including editor’s cross references to Bonhoeffer’s commentary on Ps 119, presumed allusions to Ps 119 (again, determined by an editor), and presumed allusions to Bonhoeffer’s other writings on Ps 119—do not possess sufficient verisimilitude and are therefore not included in this table.

Table 4.1. Cited References to Psalm 119 by Bonhoeffer’s Prior to His 1940 Commentary¹⁰

DATE OF USAGE	REFERENCE	TYPE OF DOCUMENT	DBWE [DBW] CITATION
July 26, 1932	Ps 119:19	Speech	11:362 [335]
Winter Semester 1932–33	Ps 119:19	Lecture	12:213 [178]
<i>Winter Semester 1932–33</i>	<i>Ps 119</i>	<i>Lecture</i>	<i>12:220</i>
July 31, 1935	Ps 119:120	Lecture	14:386 [369]
Summer 1935	Ps 119:147	Devotional	14:864 [871]
<i>Feb 12, 1936</i>	<i>Ps 119:9</i>	<i>Lecture</i>	<i>14:569–70</i>
	<i>Ps 119: 100</i>		
July 22, 1936	Ps 119:45	Circular Letter	14:219 [201]
Aug 2, 1936	Ps 119:89	Personal Letter	14:229 [212]
<i>Apr–Aug 1936</i>	<i>Ps 119:48</i>	<i>Lecture</i>	<i>14:654</i>
Apr–Aug 1936	Ps 119:105	Lecture	14:655 [653]
Apr–Aug 1936	Ps 119:12	Lecture	14:784 [788]
	Ps 119:147–48		
Apr–Aug 1936	Ps 119:94	Lecture	14:784 [789]
Apr–Aug 1936	Ps 119:19	Lecture	14:787 [791]
	Ps 119:7		
	Ps 119:5		
Apr–Aug 1936	Ps 119:96	Lecture	14:794 [798]

¹⁰ While all uses of Ps 119 by Bonhoeffer serve a role in understanding his developing understanding and interpretation of this psalm, not all references listed here contribute the same depth of content to this topic. For example, Bonhoeffer’s reference to Ps 119 in his personal letter dated Jan 3, 1938 is merely a part of a request for a copy book by Father Benson called *The Way of Holiness*, which Bonhoeffer wanted for use in writing his Ps 119 commentary. For this reason, the analysis which follows will only interact with some of the uses listed in this table—specifically, the ones which in some way shed light on the way Bonhoeffer interpreted or applied the psalm in his teaching.

Apr–Aug 1936	Ps 119:19a	Lecture	14:808 [813]
Apr–Aug 1936	Ps 119:164	Lecture	14:811 [816]
May 22, 1936	Ps 119: 147–48	Instructional Guide	14:932 [946]
	Ps 119:164		
Aug 1937	Ps 119:45	Publication	4:59 [47]
1938–39	Ps 119:62	Notes	15:379 [364]
June 20–25, 1938	Ps 119:8	Bible Study	15:392 [378]
Sept 1938	Ps 119:147	Publication	5:51 [37]
Sept 1938	Ps 119	Publication	5:57 [42]
Jan 3, 1938	Ps 119	Personal Letter	15:28 [23]
June 18, 1939	Ps 119:105	Personal Letter	15:225 [225]
July 9, 1939	Ps 119:71	Diary	15:238 [240]
July 11, 1939	Ps 119:71	Personal Letter	15:246 [241]
Winter 1940	Ps 119	Publication	5:164 [118]
	Ps 119:19		
Winter 1940	Ps 119	Publication	5:164–65 [119]

As can be seen from this list, Bonhoeffer’s use of Ps 119 does, in fact, increase significantly following his 1935 monastery visits. Three recorded uses of Ps 119 exist from the time prior to these visits while over thirty uses exist from the years following these visits, up to the time he would write his partial commentary on this psalm in the winter of 1940.

An Analysis of Bonhoeffer’s Use of Psalm 119 Prior to the Writing of His 1940 Commentary

One of the first noted references to Ps 119 by Bonhoeffer comes from a lecture he gave in the winter of 1932–33 at Berlin University on the topic of “theological anthropology.”¹¹ In this lecture—preserved in the form of student notes from Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann—Bonhoeffer surveys various psalms to examine how they inform a theological understanding of the individual’s self-knowledge.¹² Zimmerman’s notes include Ps 8:5; 51; and 119 in a list of psalms Bonhoeffer considered for this topic. From these psalms Bonhoeffer determined:

¹¹ *DBWE* 12:214–33; *DBW* 12:178–99.

¹² *DBWE* 12:220n 44.

1. The psalmist sees himself in his history. 2. The psalmist see [sic] himself as a sinner. God's wrath is inferred from the human situation. 3. The psalmist understands himself through that which he finds before him, works, from his just nature. Convictions, the inner life, fall away. It is a matter of the work that has been done.¹³

According to Zimmermann's notes, Bonhoeffer sees in these psalms an objective, *extra nos* understanding of the human person. Zimmermann goes on to summarize Bonhoeffer's evaluation of the human person's self-knowledge from these psalms by saying that it is "Different from pietistic existence: Revelation for *the* people [and not] individualistic revelation. Ps[almist] never speaks of progress that he makes. Pietism = process of sanctification. [In the] Psalm ethos plays little role (inwardness disappears)."¹⁴ This conclusion anticipates what Bonhoeffer would write in his 1940 commentary on Ps 119:1, that our position in Christ does not originate with us, the individual, but with God. In these comments Bonhoeffer emphasizes that God is the only source of our "beginning," which starts with "his forgiving and renewing word in Jesus Christ."¹⁵

Around that same time (winter 1932–1933), Bonhoeffer twice cited together Ps 119:19 with 2 Chr 20:12.¹⁶ He did so in both cases as a way to speak to the difficult predicament the church was in with regard to its calling to proclaim and to live out the concrete commandments of God in a broken and corrupt world. Bonhoeffer found in these two Old Testament verses an expression of utter trust in God to speak a true and timely word to (and through) his church. The first occurrence of this pairing came in a speech to the International Youth Peace Conference on

¹³ *DBWE* 12:220; *DBW* 12:184.

¹⁴ *DBWE* 12:220n 46. Emphasis original. See below for a more detailed discussion of what Bonhoeffer means by his use of the word "beginning" in this commentary.

¹⁵ *DBWE* 15:497; *DBW* 14:500.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer referred to this verse in 2 Chr often during this period. In a footnote from a sermon delivered on May 8, 1932 at Trinity Church (Berlin), Marie Barnett (*DBWE* 12:434n 1) comments: "[Bonhoeffer] used 2 Chron. 20:12 several times in 1932, because in his opinion the sentence expressed, on the one hand, the feeling of not knowing what to do and, on the other hand, the necessity of the concrete commandment in Christian ethics."

July 26, 1932.¹⁷ The second occurred in a Berlin lecture given during the winter of 1932–1933 entitled “Review and Discussion of New Publications in Systematic Theology.”¹⁸ In both contexts Bonhoeffer reiterated his *extra nos* point from above, only here he emphasized the source of the church’s actions and instruction. In the Berlin lecture he asks,

Whence does the church know what God’s commandment is for this hour? For apparently this is not self-evident. “We do not know what to do,” 2 Chron. 20:12. “Do not hide your commandments from me,” Ps. 119:19. The knowledge of the commandment of God is an act of the revelation of God.¹⁹

Although the church is tempted—not only in times of persecution but in *all* times—to source its proclamation in human wisdom, Bonhoeffer uses Ps 119:19 to call the church to seek its directive solely in “the revelation of God.” He continues,

*“The commandment cannot come from anywhere except that place where the promise and fulfillment come from, namely, from Christ. From Christ alone we must know what we should do. Not, however, from him as the preaching prophet of the Sermon on the Mount, but rather from him who gives us life and forgiveness, as the one who has fulfilled God’s commandments for us, as the one who brings and promises the new world.”*²⁰

The church is called to proclaim God’s commandments. But it must not overlook the need to situate these commandments in the person of Jesus Christ, who is not only the Law Giver (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount) but also the One who perfectly fulfills the Law and who subsequently “gives life and forgiveness.”

A second area of emphasis in Bonhoeffer’s early use of Ps 119 is on its role in teaching the “way” of Christian discipleship for the church-community. It is this understanding that most likely leads Bonhoeffer to make heavy use of this psalm in the instructions for catechization he

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, “On the Theological Foundation of the Work of the World Alliance” (*DBWE* 11:356–69; *DBW* 11:327–44).

¹⁸ *DBWE* 12:213; *DBW* 12:177. This document, like Bonhoeffer’s 1932–1933 Berlin lecture just mentioned (*DBWE* 12:214–33; *DBW* 12:178–99.), has been preserved in student notes.

¹⁹ *DBWE* 11:362; *DBW* 11:335

²⁰ *DBWE* 11:363; *DBW* 11:335. Emphasis original.

would give to his Finkenwalde pastoral candidates. In his catechetical lesson outlines from the Apr–Aug 1936 session, Bonhoeffer makes repeated use of verses from Ps 119 to address numerous topics including: to defend the need for Scripture (Ps 119:48),²¹ to define the goal of teaching Scripture (Ps 119:105),²² to highlight the call for full obedience to the commands of God (Ps 119:12, 147–48),²³ to acknowledge the presence of spiritual battle in the life of the Christian (Ps 119:94),²⁴ to talk of the realities of life as *simul justus et peccator* (Ps 119:71),²⁵ to clarify the nature of God (Ps 119:96),²⁶ and to teach on the concept of thankfulness and gratitude (Ps 119:7, 62).²⁷

Out of all these “instructional” uses Bonhoeffer makes of Ps 119, however, the topic he most frequently addresses by means of this psalm is the practice of prayer and Scriptural meditation. Bonhoeffer saw these two activities as inexorably linked, and was untiring in his commitment to instill this practice in his own spirituality and in the spiritual lives of his seminary confirmands. The majority of his specific uses of Ps 119 toward this end are found in three different sources: his Finkenwalde Catechetical Outlines (Apr–Aug 1936), his “Guide to Scriptural Meditation” (May 22, 1936), and his publication *Life Together* (1938). Together these three documents demonstrate the way in which Bonhoeffer read Ps 119 not just as *descriptive* of the practice of prayer and Scripture meditation but as *prescriptive* of a particular way in which the church-community is to go about this practice. Bonhoeffer experienced this type of regular,

²¹ *DBWE* 14:654. See footnote 2.

²² *DBWE* 14:655; *DBW* 14:653.

²³ *DBWE* 14:784; *DBW* 14:788.

²⁴ *DBWE* 14:784; *DBW* 14:788. See also Bonhoeffer’s Bible Study on temptation from June 20–25, 1938 in *DBWE* 15:392; *DBW* 15:378.

²⁵ *DBWE* 15:238; *DBW* 15:240. In this letter, Bonhoeffer described this verse (Ps 119:71) as “one of my favorite sayings from my favorite psalm.”

²⁶ *DBWE* 14:794; *DBW* 14:798.

²⁷ *DBWE* 14:787; *DBW* 14:791. See also *DBWE* 15:379; *DBW* 15:364.

disciplined prayer and meditation on God’s Word—built around the weekly praying of Ps 119—at the Anglican monastery communities he visited in 1935. And, it was this type of practice which Bonhoeffer subsequently sought to implement within the spiritual community of pastoral candidates at Finkenwalde.

The first of two key texts from Ps 119 on which Bonhoeffer based this instruction is Ps 119:147–148, “I greet the dawn and cry for help; for your word I wait in hope. My eyes greet the watches of the night, that I might meditate on your promises.” These verses describe an interaction with God’s Word that both begins the psalmist’s day and continues throughout the evening hours. This pattern of continuous prayer and meditation on Scripture is further supported by a second text from Ps 119:164: “Seven times in the day I praise you; because of your righteous judgments.” From these verses, which altogether Bonhoeffer cited six times between 1935 and 1940, he defended his rationale for early morning Scripture reading, Scripture meditation, and prayer. His most explicit published exhortation for this practice is found in *Life Together*, in the chapter entitled “The Day Together,” where he writes,

Life together under the Word begins at an early hour of the day with a worship service together. A community living together gathers for praise and thanks, Scripture reading, and prayer. The profound silence of morning is first broken by the prayer and song of the community of faith. After the silence of the night and early morning, hymns and the Word of God will be heard all the more clearly. Along these lines the Holy Scriptures tell us that the first thought and the first word of the day belong to God: “O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch” (Ps. 5:4 [3]). “In the morning my prayer comes before you” (Ps. 88:14 [13]). “My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make melody. Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn” (Ps. 57:8f. [7f.]). At the break of dawn the believer thirsts and yearns for God: “I rise before dawn and cry for help. I put my hope in your words” (Ps. 119:147).²⁸

²⁸ *DBWE* 5:51; *DBW* 5:37. To this admonition, Bonhoeffer also adds evidence from Eccl 16:28 and Ecclesiasticus 39:6 [HB 5].

Bonhoeffer echoes this same sentiment in the Catechetical Outlines he provided for his pastoral candidates at Finkenwalde. In a discussion of the topic of prayer he cites Ps 119:164 and writes, “I should pray several times each day (in the morning, at midday, and in the evening).”²⁹ This same approach is further emphasized in a third document—a circular letter he wrote on May 22, 1936 to Finkenwalde graduates containing a “Guide to Scriptural Meditation.” In this letter, he asks and answers the question, “‘*Why do I meditate’ on Scripture?*” His answer, in part, is “because I need firm discipline for prayer.” He then suggests,

We too often pray according to our mood, praying for only a short time, or for a long time, or not at all. Such practice is willful. Prayer is not a free offering to God but rather service that we owe to God, service that God demands. We are not free merely to deal with prayer as we might wish. Prayer is the first worship service of each day. God makes a claim on our time for precisely this service (Ps. 119:147–48, 164).³⁰

As was noted in chapter three, this call for regular, disciplined time in prayer and Scripture meditation was seen by some of Bonhoeffer’s pastoral candidates and other Confessing Church constituents as excessive and overly regimented. Yet Bonhoeffer remained undeterred in his calling for this type of daily spiritual discipline. A main reason for this commitment was his conviction that growth in faith, in Christian discipleship, and in ministry effectiveness was all grounded in the knowledge of and dependency on the living Word of God. God’s Word was more than merely “law” or “command” for Bonhoeffer, it was “gift.” If we don’t know what to do, God’s commands can help us (Ps 119:19).³¹ When we rely on our own wisdom we wander in our own sinful way. God, however, gives us his wisdom and leads us in a way that is righteous and blessed (Ps 119:7, 100).³² This understanding of God’s law as a gift, and not a burden, was also a point he sought to emphasize in *Discipleship*:

²⁹ *DBWE* 14:811; *DBW* 14:816.

³⁰ *DBWE* 14:932; *DBW* 14:946.

³¹ *DBWE* 11:362; *DBW* 11:335.

³² *DBWE* 14:569n 34.

So the call to discipleship is a commitment solely to the person of Jesus Christ, a breaking through of all legalisms by the grace of him who calls. It is a gracious call, a gracious commandment. It is beyond enmity between law and gospel. Christ calls; the disciple follows. That is grace and commandment in one. “I walk joyfully, for I seek your commands” (Ps. 119:45).³³

Evidence of Bonhoeffer’s use of Ps 119 prior to the writing of his 1940 commentary confirms the reported increase of usage in the years following his 1935 monastery visits. This increase is reflective of the prominent role this psalm played not only in his personal spirituality but also in his academic and pastoral preaching and teaching. For Bonhoeffer, Ps 119 presented a picture of Christian discipleship which he believed was both relevant and needed in his time. The psalmist’s dependency on and devotion to God’s word found expression in its prayers. These prayers were available for the church-community to use in the shaping of its own faith and obedience to God and his word. In fact, the psalmist’s example of regular, disciplined prayer and meditation on Scripture was seen as instructive, providing a framework for the contemporary church-community’s own practices. It was these practices of prayer and Scripture meditation which, Bonhoeffer believed, would revive the church-community and guide it toward greater faith and commitment to Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer’s Partial Commentary on Psalm 119

The Context and Character of Bonhoeffer’s Commentary on Psalm 119

Following the closing of the Confessing Church’s Preacher’s Seminary at Finkenwalde in September 1937 Bonhoeffer served as an assistant pastor in Schlawe, while also working on the writing of *Discipleship* (November 1937) and *Life Together* (Fall 1938). In June of 1939 he

³³ *DBWE* 4:59; *DBW* 4:47. He makes this similar point in his Catechetical Outlines from Apr-Aug 1936 (*DBWE* 14:787; *DBW* 14:791): “*What would become of you if you did not know God’s commandment?* I would be a lost human being who goes astray and cannot find the right path. That is why I must thank God from the bottom of my heart for having shown me his will. His commandment is his grace. [—] [Hymn] [no.] 159, [v.] 4, Ps. 119:19: 119:7 I thank you with an upright heart. [v.] 5” (Emphasis original).

embarked on another trip to New York City where he intended to resume his studies at Union Theological Seminary.³⁴ Less than one month into his stay, however, he decided to return to Berlin, stating “I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”³⁵ Upon his return, he took up a vicarage briefly at Gross Schlonwitz before moving on to another vicarage at Sigurdshof in Pomerania.³⁶ His ministry in these locales was similar to what he experienced in Finkenwalde which allowed him to devote more energy to exegetical work on Ps 119. It wasn’t, however, until an extended trip to the Benedictine monastery at Ettal in the winter of 1939–1940 that Bonhoeffer was finally able to secure the kind of devoted time he needed to put together the beginnings of this commentary.³⁷

Bonhoeffer’s commentary on Ps 119 is fragmentary, meaning it is partial—only covering vv. 1–21. It has a “draft-like” quality in that it contains no preface or introduction explaining the author’s description of the background of this psalm or the interpretive approach he employs. The commentary proceeds in a verse-by-verse manner, expounding on nearly every phrase of the psalm. Despite this detailed approach, the document is quite short, spanning only thirty pages in length.³⁸ In terms of each verse’s comments, the document proceeds generally in a quantitatively

³⁴ Bonhoeffer’s first trip to New York City was for the 1930–1931 academic year, when he studied as a Sloan Fellow at Union Theological Seminary.

³⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 655.

³⁶ Gracie in Bonhoeffer, *Meditating*, 93.

³⁷ Important to a study of Bonhoeffer’s interpretation and Christology of Ps 119 in this commentary is a comparative analysis of other writing projects he was engaged in at this time. Bonhoeffer used this same get-a-way to the Ettal monastery to complete his *Prayerbook* (*DBWE* 5:155–81; *DBW* 5:107–75) and to formulate his thoughts for *Ethics* (*DBWE/DBW* 6), which he began writing in the fall of this same year. Attention will be given in this dissertation to some of this content, especially from *Prayerbook*. But the scope and limitations of this project do not allow for much in the way of a thorough study and consideration of how Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* could contribute to an understanding of his interpretation of Ps 119.

³⁸ This page count reflects the length of the commentary in *DBWE*. In *DBW* it is thirty-six pages long.

downward direction. His comments on Ps 119:1 cover seven pages in *DBWE*, while all other verses that follow are each under two pages in length. His comments on many latter verses are one page or less in length.³⁹ The verse-by-verse structure he employs in this commentary can be likened to his verse-by-verse homilies on Pss 42 and 58.⁴⁰ They share a similar theological and pastoral concern, with the perceived aim of helping the interpreter apply the biblical text to his own spiritual life. Given that this commentary is not designed for public “performance” in the same way that a sermon is, however, we notice an understandable lack of rhetorical devices common to Bonhoeffer’s verse-by-verse sermons:⁴¹ namely, repeated questions, hortatory suggestions, and, in the case of his sermon on Ps 42, regular prayers of response—each aimed at involving his audience in the process of hearing and interpreting the texts. The commentary also tends to shift topics more abruptly, a characteristic which lends to its less-polished and draft-like nature.

Within Bonhoeffer’s corpus of writings, this commentary is unique for several reasons. First, as I have already mentioned, this document is the only verse-by-verse commentary Bonhoeffer ever wrote on a specific biblical text.⁴² Second, unlike his other exegetical writings,

³⁹ See his comments on vv. 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21.

⁴⁰ See *DBWE* 14:845–54; *DBW* 14:851–60 and *DBWE* 14:963–70; *DBW* 14:980–88, respectively.

⁴¹ For example, Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 14:964; *DBW* 14:981, begins his sermon on Ps 58 with these engaging questions: “Is this terrible psalm of vengeance really our prayer? Are we even permitted to pray this way?” His sermon on Ps 42 employs similar questions throughout in addition to short prayers after each verse, such as this one, *DBWE* 14:848; *DBW* 14:854, that closes off his comments on Ps 42:3 [HB 4], Lord Jesus, when I am tempted because I cannot see God and God’s power and love in this world, help me to look resolutely to you, for you are my Lord and my God. Amen.”

⁴² Although this document is unique in its verse-by-verse treatment of a psalm, it is not the only writing by Bonhoeffer that offers an exegetical treatment of a biblical pericope. Bonhoeffer wrote a number of other documents which utilized what Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God*, 71–74, has called an “exegetical theological” approach. Included in this list are *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3* (*DBWE/DBW* 3, Winter 1932–33); “Bible Study on King David” (*DBWE* 14:870–98; *DBW* 14:878–904; Oct 8–11, 1935); a Bible study entitled “The Reconstruction of Jerusalem according to Ezra and Nehemiah” (*DBWE* 14:917–31; *DBW* 14:930–45; Apr 21, 1936), and *Discipleship* (*DBWE/DBW* 4, 1937).

this commentary includes interaction with Hebrew vocabulary.⁴³ For example, in his comments on the first verse of this psalm, Bonhoeffer discusses the meaning of תּוֹרָה, translating it as “the law” and defining it as “that which has been determined by lot.”⁴⁴ In v. 4 he suggests that פֶּקֶד “derives from the verb for ‘to seek,’ ‘to visit,’ ‘to attend.’ Thus, it refers to that which God pays heed, looks to, that by which he visits and besets human beings.” He continues, “Thus the direction toward human beings is included in the commandments.”⁴⁵ His use of Hebrew is basic and not overly technical or expansive. He introduces his first use in his comments on v. 1 by stating: “The original meaning of Torah, the law, is....”⁴⁶ His second use in v. 4 begins, “This is also illustrated by the Hebrew term [for] ‘commandment’....”⁴⁷ In neither case does he cite any lexical or grammatical references for support.⁴⁸ His use of Hebrew shows a level of exegetical interaction not incorporated into his earlier writings on the Psalms,⁴⁹ and may reflect a style of

⁴³ Although there is no doubt that Bonhoeffer’s training involved the learning of Koine Greek and Biblical Hebrew, he rarely interacted with this type of content in his speeches, lectures, sermons, or exegetical writings. Perhaps, as I noted in the summary of chapter three, this was a reaction against the over-emphasis of his academic training on the methods of historical-criticism and textual criticism which, in his opinion, did not aid in procuring a spiritually edifying message from the biblical text.

⁴⁴ *DBW* 15:499–500; *DBW* 15:503–4. The *DBWE* footnote on this comment reads: “This etymological derivation of ‘torah’ as ‘that which has been determined by lot’ [Bonhoeffer’s German here is ‘das Los Geworfene,’ which literally means throwing or casting the lot ...] probably was introduced by Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 468. This interpretation has been generally discarded in more recent scholarship (cf. Botterwerk, Fabry, and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15:609–46).”

⁴⁵ *DBWE* 15:505; *DBW* 15:509.

⁴⁶ *DBWE* 15:499; *DBW* 15:503.

⁴⁷ *DBWE* 15:505; *DBW* 15:510.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer also offers, in two different instances, a “literal” rendering of a verse of this psalm. These “literal” translations can be seen in his comments on Ps 119:4 (*DBWE* 15:505; *DBW* 15:509) and on Ps 119:5 (*DBWE* 15:506; *DBW* 15:510). Given that the original manuscript did not include the biblical text at the head of each verse’s comments, this practice (only utilized on Ps 119:4, 5) afforded him the ability to refer to back to specific words in the text: the 2ms “you” in v. 4 and the opening “O!” in v. 5.

⁴⁹ Although Bonhoeffer does not make much use of Hebrew in his writings, he does incorporate NT Greek more freely, particularly in his lectures and exercises from Finkenwalde. See, for example, his discussion of 2 Cor 5:19–21 (*DBWE* 14:352; *DBW* 14:333), Gal 3:10–13 (*DBWE* 14:356; *DBW* 14:337), and Mk 4:26–29 (*DBWE* 14:368; *DBW* 14:350).

commentary writing prevalent at this time, or one which Bonhoeffer was trying to model.⁵⁰ A third unique characteristic of this commentary is the evidence it provides of his knowledge of and dependence on Luther's writings. Several times in this document Bonhoeffer references Luther and his 1521 translation of Ps 119.⁵¹ He also cites Luther two other times from sources other than his 1521 translation.⁵²

This introduction and overview of the historical and literary context of Bonhoeffer's commentary on Ps 119 sets the stage for the following analysis of this document. In what follows, I will examine Bonhoeffer's partial commentary for its contribution to an understanding of his Christological exegesis of the Psalter, particularly from this latter point in his vocational ministry. I will consider how he develops and/or changes his two-fold hermeneutical emphasis of prayer and of the crucified of Christ in the Psalms, beginning first with the way in which Bonhoeffer discusses the relationship of prayer to the psalm.

The Relationship of Prayer to Psalm 119 in Bonhoeffer's Commentary

In chapter three I proposed that Bonhoeffer viewed the Psalms through the hermeneutical lens of prayer, a fact which guided his interpretation in a number of significant ways. First, he maintained, along with Luther, that the Psalms are the prayerbook of the Bible and that they

⁵⁰ See below for a brief presentation and comparison of other commentaries published during this same early twentieth-century period.

⁵¹ See *DBWE* 15:500, 502, 507, 510, 517, 518; *DBW* 15:504, 505, 511, 515, 523, 525. Outside of these references to Luther, the only other secondary sources Bonhoeffer cites in this commentary are from Paul Geysler (see *DBWE* 15:506; *DBW* 15:510) and the Formula of Concord (see *DBWE* 15:510; *DBW* 15:515).

⁵² On v. 14, *DBWE* 15:517; *DBW* 15: 523, the editors, footnote 82, provide the following: "Cf. Witte, *Nun freut euch lieben Christen gemein*, 204, from the postscript of the Rothschen Sommerpostille of the sermons of Luther (1531): 'Another sermon on the third Sunday after Easter on John 1:16–23' (*WA* 22:432,24–27)." On v. 16, *DBWE* 15:518; *DBW* 15:525, the editors, in footnote 88, cite "Luther's explanation of the sacrament of the altar in the Small Catechism (1529), in Book of Concord, 607." Outside of these references to Luther, the only other secondary sources Bonhoeffer cites in this commentary are from Paul Geysler (see *DBWE* 15:506; *DBW* 15:510) and the Formula of Concord (see *DBWE* 15:510; *DBW* 15:515).

serve as a primer for prayer, teaching the church-community *what* to pray and *how* to pray.⁵³ Second, he argued that the Psalms are not only the prayerbook of the *Bible* but, in an on-going sense, the prayerbook of the *church*. We can read the psalms—but it is only in praying them corporately within the church-community that we understand them. And, third, Bonhoeffer suggested that the hermeneutical key to the Psalter was the literal-historical reality of Jesus Christ praying the Psalms in his incarnation. He argued, most clearly in his 1935 “Christus in den Psalmen” lecture, that Jesus prayed these prayers in his humanity and had his prayers answered by his Father. As we pray these same prayers, we are praying *in Jesus’s name* as we make our petitions to God the Father by means of the very same prayers uttered by the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. Just like Jesus, therefore, Bonhoeffer proposed that we can be assured not only that God the Father will hear our prayers but that he will also answer them according to his good will and purpose. Bonhoeffer’s conviction was that the Psalms are prayers that find their meaning and their answer in Jesus Christ as they are uttered in Jesus’s name by his church-community.

A survey of Bonhoeffer’s commentary on Ps 119 reveals that he, in many ways, maintains a basic presupposition of the integral role of prayer in understanding and appropriating the Psalter. However, his way of interacting with this presupposition here is more implicit than explicit. In no part of his commentary does Bonhoeffer revisit or redefine his earlier instructions on the relationship of prayer to the Psalter. Since this fragmentary work is unfinished, it is uncertain whether he intended to add this information to the completed form of this work, or if he assumed it was already well-established by his prior teaching and writing.⁵⁴ What is different

⁵³ Brian Brock, *Singing*, 73, shares this evaluation: “Bonhoeffer follows Luther in understanding the book as a ‘children’s primer’ for learning to talk to God, in assuming that only one book in the Bible is devoted to training our speech and affections toward God.”

⁵⁴ The main documents which contain Bonhoeffer’s teaching on this topic were analyzed in chapter three:

in this commentary from his earlier writings is the accent he places on the psalm simply being a prayer addressed to God from the mouth of a faithful disciple. This understanding is expressed in numerous places where he makes statements such as, “The person who prayed our psalm”⁵⁵ or “The ‘you’ with which the person praying addresses God indicates that throughout this psalm it is not the human being who is addressed but God”⁵⁶ or “A young man has prayed this psalm and this verse.”⁵⁷ In contrast to his previous writings on this topic, there appears to be in this commentary more stress on the “person who *prayed* our psalm” than on the person who *now* tries to appropriate this psalm and make it their own prayer through Jesus Christ.

In *Prayerbook*, Bonhoeffer categorizes Ps 119 under the theme of “The Law.”⁵⁸ As a “torah” or “law” psalm, Ps 119 elevates God’s word as the source of life and as the disciple’s sole guide for faithful living. God’s commandments set forth the way that a faithful disciple is to live, and represents a way which stands in contrast to the ways of the world. He states that it is not natural for us to want to know or to follow God’s commands. Therefore, Bonhoeffer calls the prayer of this psalm “the prayer of the pilgrim in a foreign land.”⁵⁹ The way in which the pilgrim is introduced to and sustained in this connection to God’s word is through prayer. Bonhoeffer describes this desire to pray as something that comes to us by way of gift, in the same way that faith is also the gift of God. In his comments on v. 18, he writes, “It is a gift of grace to recognize

Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde lecture, “Christus in den Psalmen,” and his publications, *Life Together* and *Prayerbook*. The last of these, *Prayerbook*, is a document Bonhoeffer was working on at the same time he was writing this commentary on Ps 119.

⁵⁵ See Bonhoeffer’s comments on v. 1: *DBWE* 15:501; *DBW* 15:505.

⁵⁶ See Bonhoeffer’s comments on v. 4: *DBWE* 15:505; *DBW* 15:510.

⁵⁷ See Bonhoeffer’s comments on v. 9: *DBWE* 15:511; *DBW* 15:516.

⁵⁸ *DBWE* 5:164; *DBW* 5:118.

⁵⁹ *DBWE* 15:523; *DBW* 15:531.

one's own blindness to God's word and to be able to pray for opened eyes."⁶⁰ God gives this gift as he prompts us to pray, and he adds to this gift by also supplying the words to pray in a psalm like Ps 119.⁶¹

Bonhoeffer fashions the prayer of Ps 119 as a way of expressing to God a desire and love for his word. Yet, at the same time, it is also the means of taking in that word to one's heart and mind. In his comments on v. 15, Bonhoeffer defines meditation as "prayerful consideration of the Scriptures.... Meditation means to take God's word prayerfully into my heart." Meditation, he continues, along with "exegesis [is] indispensable for the one who honestly seeks God's precepts, not his own thoughts."⁶² God's word is what the faithful pilgrim seeks. To be absent of this word is his greatest fear. This, Bonhoeffer suggests, is why the psalmist prays in v. 19, "Do not hide from me your commandments." Regarding the petition in this verse Bonhoeffer writes,

For the one who has become a stranger on earth according to God's will and call, there is in truth only *one* thought that can fill him with deep fear, namely, to no longer recognize God's will, to no longer know what God demands of him. Certainly, God is often hidden to us in our personal lives or in his action in history; this is not what is alarming. But when God's revealed commandment is obscured, so that we no longer recognize from God's word what we are to do, it is a severe trial. In the middle of the joyous certainty of God's commandments, we are overcome by this fear: what if God willed one day to hide his commandments from me? I should fall into nothingness; I should fall with the very first step; I should perish in the foreign land.⁶³

The psalmist's prayer gives expression to this daily desire and need for God and his word, and it serves as an aid for hearing, understanding, and obeying that word. In this way, the praying of Ps

⁶⁰ *DBWE* 15:520–21; *DBW* 15:528.

⁶¹ Here, we should recall Bonhoeffer's July 31, 1935 lecture "Christ in the Psalms" (*DBWE* 14:387–93; *DBW* 14:369–77) in which he spoke of the dual nature of the Psalter: it is first God's word to us; and secondly, it is our words (prayers) back to God.

⁶² *DBWE* 15:517; *DBW* 15:524.

⁶³ *DBWE* 15:523; *DBW* 15:531. Emphasis original.

119 becomes a means through which the faithful disciple can “remain in” God’s word (Jn 15:5–7), even as this word corrects and guides the disciple in obedience and faith-filled action.⁶⁴

Overall, the way that Bonhoeffer deals in this commentary with the relationship of prayer to this psalm is not the same as he does in his earlier Finkenwalde writings. In earlier writings—particularly his “Christus in den Psalmen” lecture—he made bold statements such as: “Those who have never yet prayed the Psalms within the church—community itself but rather only alone, by themselves, do not yet know them.”⁶⁵ This type of emphasis on “communal prayer” is not found in this commentary, except if you take into consideration the general way in which he uses plural pronouns (“us” and “our”) when discussing the content of the psalm.⁶⁶ An additional change is the absence of any interaction with the historical reality and interpretive significance of Jesus praying this psalm in his incarnation. In fact, this aspect of his Christological interpretation—so prominent in “Christus in den Psalmen,” *Life Together*, and *Prayerbook*—is not clearly discerned in this commentary. In place of this perspective, Bonhoeffer employs a more theological and catechetical reading of the psalm. In Bonhoeffer’s analysis, the psalm functions as an “instructor” and “companion” in prayer, teaching the church-community *how* to pray by providing the words *to pray*. Although Jesus Christ is mentioned regularly throughout the commentary, it is never in terms of the historical reality of him praying this psalm in his incarnation. Rather, his emphasis is on the way in which this prayer relates to the modern-day church-community as a model and teacher. He explores this facet of the psalm and expounds on what it teaches us theologically in terms of the relationship we have with God as faithful

⁶⁴ See Bonhoeffer’s comments on v. 5 (*DBWE* 15:506; *DBW* 15:510–11). On this verse, Brian Brock, *Singing*, 81, emphasizes a similar understanding of Bonhoeffer’s comprehension of prayer: “If the commandments are God’s designated way to us, then prayer is our way to hold fast to them and so to God.”

⁶⁵ *DBWE* 14:387; *DBW* 14:370.

⁶⁶ For example, on v. 9 he asks, “Does this question about the blameless, pure way sound unyouthful to us, unfree, life-negating?” And on v. 11 he writes, “it is never enough to have read God’s word. It must enter us deeply, dwell in us like the Holiest of Holies in the sanctuary, so that we do not stray in thoughts, words, and deeds.”

disciples.

The Relationship of Jesus Christ to Psalm 119 in Bonhoeffer's Commentary

In the same way that Bonhoeffer's treatment of the relationship of prayer to the interpretation of Ps 119 takes on a more theological character in this commentary, so does his discussion of the relationship of this psalm to the person and work of Jesus Christ. In 1937, Bonhoeffer preached his sermon on Ps 58 in which he stated that praying the Psalms as the prayerbook of Christ will always lead the church-community to the cross of Christ. Jesus on the cross, he asserted, is the only answer to the plea of the Psalms.⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer's comments in the introduction to his 1940 *Prayerbook* reflect a related, albeit less explicit, conviction:

If we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible, and especially the Psalms, we must not, therefore, first ask what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ. We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God's Word, and only then can we pray them with Jesus Christ.⁶⁸

At first glance, it appears that Bonhoeffer's Ps 119 commentary employs a similar Christ-centered approach, simply because of the frequent mention of Jesus Christ throughout.⁶⁹ Yet upon closer examination, an interpretive change is discerned. In this commentary, Bonhoeffer does not speak, as he does in *Prayerbook*, of Jesus Christ as "the incarnate Son of God, who has borne all human weakness in his own flesh, who here pours out the heart of all humanity before God, and who stands in our place and prays for us"⁷⁰—this, despite the fact that these two documents were being written at approximately the same time. Rather, Jesus is described as the one who, through his work of redemption, made possible a relationship with God by faith, and

⁶⁷ *DBWE* 14:968–70; *DBW* 14:985–88.

⁶⁸ *DBWE* 5:157; *DBW* 5:108–9. *Prayerbook* (*DBWE* 5:141–81; *DBW* 5:107–75) was mostly likely being written at the same time as this commentary. It was published as the last of Bonhoeffer's works later in 1940.

⁶⁹ There are twenty-eight occurrences of the name of Jesus in this twenty-one verse commentary. They appear in his discussion of Ps 119:1 (5x), 3 (2x), 8 (3x), 9 (2x), 13 (2x), 14 (5x), 15 (2x), 16 (3x), 18 (3x), 21 (1x).

⁷⁰ *DBWE* 5:159–60; *DBW* 5:111.

who now sustains the believer in the way of God and his statutes. In other words, the relationship of Jesus Christ to this psalm, and to the one who would now make this psalm their own prayer, is more retrospective in nature. Jesus has made it possible for the believer to pray this psalm today because of what he accomplished in redemption history. Jesus is presented as one who acted salvifically in history at the cross. His present-day relationship to this psalm, then, is as the one who establishes and maintains the praying believer in saving faith and in a desire to know and obey God's word.

The opening paragraph of this commentary expresses this understanding as Bonhoeffer presents God's work through Jesus Christ as the starting point for our relationship with him. He writes on v. 1,

Whoever ... [says, "*Happy are those* whose way is blameless, who walk in the *law* of the Lord"⁷¹] presumes that the beginning has already occurred. He points out that the life with God consists not only and not essentially of ever-new beginnings.... Because God's beginning with us has already occurred, our life with God is a path being walked within God's law. Is that the servitude of human beings under the law? No, it is the freedom from the murderous law of never-ending beginnings. To wait for a new beginning, day after day, thinking that one has found it countless times only to declare it lost in the evening: this is the complete destruction of faith in that God who set the beginning once through his forgiving and renewing word in Jesus Christ, that is, in my baptism, in my rebirth, in my conversion.⁷²

With these comments, Bonhoeffer emphasizes the *extra nos* reality of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ.⁷³

Although it is not made clear in Bonhoeffer's comments, he does have a particular audience in mind when he speaks these corrective words. They are directed at "pietistic" believers whom, he believes, give too much weight to their own involvement in the process of

⁷¹ Emphasis original. This translation is provided by the editors of *DBWE* 15 since Bonhoeffer did not originally cite the actual verses in his manuscript. See *DBWE* 15:496n 2.

⁷² *DBWE* 15:496–97; *DBW* 499–500.

⁷³ On this topic see also Bonhoeffer's "Dogmatic Exercises on 'Theological Anthropology' (Student Notes)" in *DBWE* 12:220; *DBW* 12:184.

sanctification and thereby emphasize their “ever-new beginnings” with God. As David McL.

Gracie comments:

At the outset of this meditation Bonhoeffer is very concerned to distinguish between what he calls God’s beginning and our own beginnings. It may help the reader to know that he was very critical of Christian movements which emphasized “conversion” in a way that led people to stay focused on their own “beginnings.” The Oxford Group (later Moral Rearmament) came in for strong criticism along these lines.... He was also ready to criticize any form of piety in his own tradition that led to preoccupation with the self.⁷⁴

For Bonhoeffer, justification was an objective declaration delivered to the individual based on the salvific actions of Jesus Christ in history on the cross. It was this gracious act carried out by God for the benefit of the sinner which “set the beginning” for those who would pray this psalm. To live in denial of this *extra nos* action was, in Bonhoeffer’s estimation, a demonstration of a lack of faith in Christ. It promoted a life of self-righteousness in which one sought constant reaffirmation of salvation by means of one’s own good works and not by the merits of the perfect, atoning work of Jesus Christ at the cross.

Bonhoeffer continues this similar line of thought as he explicates his understanding of “the law,” a phrase which is so frequently cited in Ps 119. He maintains throughout his commentary that “God’s law is inseparable from his redemptive deed.” Historically, in the pre-Christ context of the original psalm, this “redemptive deed” was understood as the Exodus. In Dt 6:20–25, which Bonhoeffer cites in his comments on v. 1,⁷⁵ this redemptive deed is put into narrative terms and presented as the answer to the question, “*What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?*”⁷⁶ The answer given in

⁷⁴ Gracie in Bonhoeffer, *Meditating*, 94.

⁷⁵ See *DBWE* 15:498; *DBW* 15:502.

⁷⁶ Brian Brock *Singing*, 78, sees Bonhoeffer’s commentary on Ps 119 as an expression of Bonhoeffer’s “understanding of the role Scripture plays in Christian ethical deliberation.” He cites the comments from Bonhoeffer on v. 1 and asks: “What, then, is the law in which the blessed so walk? Bonhoeffer answers by quoting the *Shema* (Deut. 6:20–25) in full.... The law is God’s deeds, commandments, and promise. Jesus Christ encapsulates the

these verses contains both a promise and a command. The promise, according to Dt 6:23, was that they would be given a land in which to dwell; the command, according to Dt 6:24, was that they were, in turn, to “observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to [be kept] alive.”⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer connected the redemptive act of God in the Exodus—carried out for the benefit of all Israel—to the redemptive act of Jesus Christ at the cross, which was carried out for the benefit of all humankind. This gracious work of God in Jesus Christ frames Bonhoeffer’s understanding of “the law” as it is used in Ps 119. And so he wrote on v. 1,

What is the ‘law’? ... Whoever asks about the law will be reminded of Jesus Christ and the redemption from servitude in sin and death that in him has been accomplished for all human beings and will be reminded of the new beginning set by God in Jesus Christ for all human beings. The question about the law of God is answered not by a moral doctrine [Sittenlehre], a norm, but by a historical event, not by an unfulfilled ideal but by an act completed by God. If we ask how we can begin a life with God, Scripture answers that God has already begun life with us.⁷⁸

Despite his repeated reference to “the law” throughout his commentary, Bonhoeffer’s definition of this concept remains ambiguous, particularly in terms of how he understands the relationship of “the law” to the Christian believer today.⁷⁹ In the portion of his comments on v. 1 just quoted, he appears to downplay the moral nature of the law and its “idealistic” list of do’s and don’ts. Since he has already discussed the self-righteous temptation for humans to construct a program of righteousness by which they seek to justify themselves before God, he may be attempting at this point to help the one who would pray this psalm avoid this way of thinking. He

deliverance from death and the new beginning that Torah promises.... For Bonhoeffer, the law is a space created by God’s judgments, which humans truly inhabit only in the acknowledgment that it is God who acts and decides in the fullest sense of the words, but who makes humans into real actors.”

⁷⁷ *DBWE* 15:498; *DBW* 15:501–2.

⁷⁸ *DBWE* 15:498; *DBW* 15:501

⁷⁹ Space does not allow for a thoroughgoing exploration of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the law in Ps 119. For further study of this topic, analysis should be given to two important publications: *Discipleship* (*DBWE/DBW* 4) and *Ethics* (*DBWE/DBW* 6). The former was inspired, in part, by conversations Bonhoeffer had with Frenchman and fellow Union Theological Seminary student Jean Lasserre in 1930–1931. *Discipleship* was completed while at Finkenwalde in 1935–1936 and published in 1937. *Ethics* was written in five phases across the years of 1940–1943.

speaks of the importance of keeping “God’s righteous demands”⁸⁰ and of viewing God’s laws as “commandments,” and as “demands” which we are given to follow,⁸¹ yet he tends to talk of them more generally as the “way” of God and not as specific ethical or moral tasks. For example, in his comments on v. 3 (“They also do no wrong, [but] in his ways they walk”), Bonhoeffer suggests that,

God’s ways are the ways that he has tread before and that we are to walk with him now. God does not allow us to walk a path that he has not walked before and on which he would not precede us. It is the way cleared by God and protected by God on which he calls us. Thus it truly is His way.⁸²

Through the efficacy of God’s “beginning” work for the believer, God unveils his righteous way. Bonhoeffer claims that “[t]he entire gospel message of salvation can be called simply ‘the way’ (Acts 19:9; 22:4; 24:14) or the ‘way of God’ (Acts 18:25, 26).” This “way” is not a path of perfection based on the merits of the believer, but rather on God’s own righteousness. The “way of God,” Bonhoeffer concludes, is not our steps toward God but, ultimately, “[t]he way of God is God’s way to human beings, and only in this way is it the way of human beings to God. Its name is Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6). Whoever is on this way, whoever is in Jesus Christ, does no evil.”⁸³

The manner in which Bonhoeffer speaks of the relationship of Jesus Christ to this psalm is noticeably different from what he demonstrated in his Ps 58 sermon. It is also lacking some of the unique characteristics of the Christological hermeneutic he calls for in “Christus in den Psalmen.”⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer does not put the words of this psalm into the mouth of Jesus as its

⁸⁰ See comments on v. 7, *DBWE* 15:509; *DBW* 15:514.

⁸¹ See comments on v. 19, *DBWE* 15:523; *DBW* 15:531.

⁸² *DBWE* 15:504; *DBW* 15:507.

⁸³ *DBWE* 15:505; *DBW* 15:509.

⁸⁴ If Bonhoeffer were to employ a hermeneutic similar to what he demonstrates and calls for in his earlier writings, one might expect to read the following in this commentary: As the “Holy One of God” (Mk 1:24; Lk 4:34; Jn 6:69), who alone is without sin (Heb 4:15), Jesus is “the Author and Perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:2). Jesus embodies perfectly the prayer of Ps 119 as the one who perfectly walks “in the law of the Lord” (vv. 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9,

preeminent speaker. Nor does he speak of Jesus praying this psalm now with and for his church-community. Instead he situates Jesus alongside those who would seek to make this prayer their own as an expression of faith in Jesus. Because of what Jesus has done in redemption, the Christian can be given this new desire for his law, which finds an apt and God-inspired expression in the prayer of Ps 119.⁸⁵

Bonhoeffer's Commentary in Context of Other Contemporary Commentaries

Outside of a small handful of examples, newly published verse-by-verse commentaries on the Psalms were not abundant in the early part of the twentieth century. What was more common was biblical theologies and introductions which included in them sections on the general background and interpretation of the Psalter.⁸⁶ The question of what Psalms commentaries were *en vogue* in Bonhoeffer's early twentieth century context—and, more specifically, what commentaries he may have consulted—is not an easy question to answer. I am able, however, to provide a brief presentation of commentary sources on Ps 119 that were in print during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which therefore may exemplify the type of reference works with which Bonhoeffer was familiar.

12, 13, 17, 18), who “seeks [God] with [his] whole heart” (vv. 2, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20) and who “does no wrong” (vv. 3, 11, 21). The church-community cannot pray this psalm apart from Jesus Christ. Jesus prayed this psalm in his incarnation as one who perfectly fulfilled it and who now, in his eternal intercession before the throne of God, allows the church-community to give voice to its pleas in union with him. The church-community experiences an answer to this prayer through the work of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies them on the basis of atoning and redeeming sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

⁸⁵ This perspective aligns with what Bonhoeffer wrote about psalms of “the Law” in *Prayerbook, DBWE* 5:164–65; *DBW* 5:119: “Jesus himself was under the law and fulfilled it in total obedience to the Father. God’s will became his joy, his food. So in us he gives thanks for the grace of the law and grants us joy in its fulfillment. Now we confess our love for the law. We affirm that we hold it dear, and we ask that we continue to be preserved blameless in it. We do not do this in our own power, but we pray it in the name of Jesus Christ, who is for us and in us.”

⁸⁶ Included in a list of these types of publications—present during the early twentieth century—are introductory works by Gunkel, Mowinckel, and Schlatter (all cited above), along with von Rad (see “Israel Before Jahweh (Israel’s Answer)” in *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], 355–459) and Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament and a Commentary on the Messianic Predictions*, trans. Theodore Meyer (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1854).

*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms by Charles Augustus Briggs*⁸⁷

Briggs's (AD 1841–1913) commentary, published in 1907, is a technical work interacting closely with the HB of this psalm at the lexical and textual level. It repeatedly speaks in the introduction to Ps 119 of the “artificial” nature of this psalm,⁸⁸ but this is may very well be in reference to the intentional and consistent effort required by the psalm's acrostic structure, and not a judgment of its quality or value. The description as “artificial,” in this case, is most likely meant to contrast this psalm with others which appear to derive more spontaneously from a heart response to a crisis or need. Unlike Bonhoeffer's commentary, Briggs's publication offers a definition of each of the eight terms used in Ps 119 to speak of God's “Law.”⁸⁹ Briggs regularly points out what he suggests are copyist errors in the text, additionally offering his opinion on what “the original text” probably said.⁹⁰ This should not be confused with Bonhoeffer's suggestion of a “literal” rendering of the text of Ps 119, since Bonhoeffer was basing his translation on the MT and not on a theory of an “errant” and now “corrected” text. Most of the comments from Briggs on individual verses of this psalm focus on defining terms or on describing the psalm's parallelism, but not, like Bonhoeffer, on the psalm's theological meaning or application to the church. As evidence of Briggs's historical-critical presuppositions—which include a strong emphasis on the description of the psalm's *Sitz im Leben*—Briggs identifies this psalm as originating late in the life of Israel, sometime “after the rise of the Pharisaic party, at the time of their persecution because of zeal for the Law by the Hellenistic party in Israel, and

⁸⁷ Charles Augustus Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark: 1907).

⁸⁸ Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 414: “Ps. 119 . . . is the most artificial of the Psalms. It is composed of twenty-two alphabetical Strs., in the order of the Hebrew alphabet. . . . The Ps. is also artificial at the close of its lines, rhyming with the characteristic suffix, or some form corresponding with it in utterance.”

⁸⁹ Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 415.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 415, 420, 421.

especially by the haughty leaders and princes who represented the Syrian interest, toward the close of the Greek period.”⁹¹ As I noted above, Bonhoeffer’s commentary contains none of this type of background analysis of the psalm.

Clarke’s Commentary by Adam Clark

Clarke’s (AD 1762–1832) commentary was originally published in 1837 and was followed by a number of reprints incorporating “the author’s corrections.”⁹² The volume containing his commentary on the Psalter is volume three of a six-part collection covering the whole Bible. Unlike Bonhoeffer’s commentary, Clarke’s treatment of Ps 119 proceeds with a strict two-part structure, which we might label “text and analysis” and “commentary.”⁹³ All of Clarke’s comments come in the form of footnotes, positioned beneath the presentation of the text, which is taken from the KJV. Clarke subtitles this psalm, “The various excellencies and important uses of the law or revelation of God.”⁹⁴ In the first section of his interaction with the text, Clarke closely (yet briefly) examines the meaning of HB words and phrases, seeking to clarify their semantic range and their contribution to the meaning of that particular stanza. His definition of these terms is concise and clear. Although Clark, in his introduction, incorporates a brief discussion of the interpretation of the psalm by the Church Fathers,⁹⁵ his actual comments on the

⁹¹ Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms* 417–19.

⁹² Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, vol. III: Job to Solomon’s Song (London: T. Tegg & Son, 1837). The edition that I am citing was published in New York by The Methodist Concern in 1882. It is based on Clarke’s 1837 edition, which includes Clarke’s complete “corrections” to earlier editions and is considered the seminal version of his full work. The very first printing of Clarke’s (uncorrected) commentary was by Nuttall, Fisher, and Dixon in Liverpool in 1813. The early dates of publication—1837 for the “corrected” version and 1883 for a New York-based version—along with the author’s denominational affiliation make it unlikely that Bonhoeffer would have consulted this work.

⁹³ In Clarke’s own words, *Commentary*, 608, his approach is to “make short remarks on the principal subjects in each part [stanza]; and, at the end of each, [to] endeavor by the *Analysis* to show the *connexion* [sic] which the *eight* verses of each have among themselves, and the use which the reader should make of them.”

⁹⁴ Clarke, *Commentary*, 606.

⁹⁵ See Clarke, *Commentary*, 607–8.

text of the psalm stay tightly linked to the biblical text itself—much more, in fact, than Bonhoeffer does in his commentary. Clarke judiciously relates his interpretation of Ps 119 to Jesus Christ, especially drawing on verbal connections to the “word”⁹⁶ and on the psalmist’s acknowledgment of his need for help in obeying God’s commandments.⁹⁷ Although Clarke’s commentary certainly could aid a pastor with the tasks of exegeting and preaching this psalm, it is, in my estimation, more academic in nature, particularly due to its technical use of biblical Hebrew throughout. This characteristic sets it in contrast with Bonhoeffer’s commentary which appears to strike a more devotional or lay-level tone.

Popular Commentary on the Bible: The Old Testament by Paul Kretzmann⁹⁸

In his brief introduction to Ps 119, a psalm which Kretzmann (AD 1883–1965) subtitles “The Christian’s Golden ABC of the Praise, Power, and Value of God’s Word,”⁹⁹ he speaks not of its “artificial” nature, such as Briggs did, but of its beauty and its usefulness as “a manual of pious thought, especially for all teachers of the Word.”¹⁰⁰ In his actual comments on the verses of this psalm, Kretzmann weaves together a presentation of the text of the psalm (printed in bold face and in English only) with explanatory interjections on the meaning of the words and phrases used in the psalm. Kretzmann’s approach is more popular in nature—as depicted by the title of his two-volume commentary series—and includes no reference to the HB of the psalm text or of how it should best be translated “in the original.” Like Bonhoeffer, Kretzmann avoids any literary discussion of the psalm’s parallelistic structure or the presence of “copyist errors” in the

⁹⁶ See comments on v. 11, Clarke, *Commentary*, 609.

⁹⁷ See comments on v. 7, Clarke, *Commentary*, 608.

⁹⁸ Paul E. Kretzmann, *The Poetical and Prophetical Books*, vol. 2 in *Popular Commentary of the Bible: The Old Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1924).

⁹⁹ Kretzmann, *Poetical*, 183.

¹⁰⁰ Kretzmann, *Poetical*, 183.

common translations of the text. Even though he works verse-by-verse and phrase-by-phrase through the psalm, his treatment, in my opinion, struggles to be seen as “analysis” since it consists mostly of rephrasing the biblical text and not necessarily expounding on its meaning. Bonhoeffer’s commentary, although sharing Kretzmann’s devotional concern, probes much more deeply into the psalm’s theological and instructional dimensions.

Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament by Keil and Delitzsch¹⁰¹

This multi-volume work on the Old Testament by Carl Friedrich Keil (AD 1807–1888) and Franz Delitzsch (AD 1813–1890) contains a treatment of the whole Psalter in three volumes. The comments in the preface of the first volume reveal the fact that it is Delitzsch who is the primary scholar responsible for the work on the Psalms.¹⁰² Before delving into Delitzsch’s actual comments on the Psalms, it seems noteworthy to mention the information he provides regarding important publications on the Psalms from his mid-nineteenth century setting. In a short preface, he cites a number of works on the Psalms which aided him in his own work, both by providing helpful insights and by offering criticism of his own (earlier) work on the Psalms.¹⁰³ Among this list he includes writings by Hupfield,¹⁰⁴ Ewald,¹⁰⁵ Böttcher,¹⁰⁶ Von Ortenberg,¹⁰⁷ Kurz,¹⁰⁸ Böhl,¹⁰⁹

¹⁰¹ Carl Fredreich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952).

¹⁰² Keil and Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1: v–vii.

¹⁰³ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1: v, cites his earlier publication—written seven years before this current work—as *Commentar über den Psalter*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1859–1860). Since he published that work, Delitzsch says that “large and important contributions have been made towards the exposition of the Psalms.”

¹⁰⁴ Hermann Hupfield, *Die Psalmen: Übersetzt und ausgelegt* (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1855).

¹⁰⁵ Heinrich Ewald, *Allgemeines über die Hebräische Dichtung und über Das Psalmenbuch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1866).

¹⁰⁶ Friedrich Böttcher, *Neue exegetisch-kritische Aehrenlese zum Alten Testamente*, Zweite Abtheilung: 1 Regum–Psalmi (Leipzig: Johan Ambrosius Barth, 1863).

¹⁰⁷ Emil Fr. Jul. Ortenberg, *Zur Textkritik der Psalmen* (Halle: Richard Mühlmann, 1861).

¹⁰⁸ J. S. Kurz, *Zur Theologie der Psalmen* (Dorpat: C. J. Karow, 1865).

Kamphausen (an exposition of the Psalms found in Bunsen's *Bibelwerk*),¹¹⁰ and Hitzig.¹¹¹ It is this last publication from Hitzig which Delitzsch says was most helpful to him.¹¹²

Turning to Delitzsch's actual commentary, he writes of this psalm that "[t]he whole Psalm is a prayer for steadfastness [sic] in the midst of an ungodly, degenerate race, and in the midst of great trouble, which is heightened by the pain he feels at the prevailing apostasy, and a prayer for ultimate deliverance which rises in group Kaph to an urgent how long!"¹¹³ Although I have commented above on the absence of this type of introductory statement in Bonhoeffer's commentary, a look at Bonhoeffer's description of "Law" psalms in *Prayerbook* provides a comparable insertion:

The three psalms (1, 19, 119) that in a special way make the law of God the object of thanksgiving, praise, and petition, wish above all to make clear to us the blessing of the law.... It is grace to know God's commands. They free us from self-made plans and conflicts. They make our steps certain and our way joyful. We are given God's commands so that we may fulfill them, and "[God's] commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3) for those who have found all salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself was under the law and fulfilled it in total obedience to the Father. God's will became his joy, his food. So in us he gives thanks for the grace of the law and grants us joy in its fulfillment. Now we confess our love for the law. We affirm that we hold it dear, and we ask that we continue to be preserved blameless in it. We do not do this in our own power, but we pray it in the name of Jesus Christ, who is for us and in us.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Eduard Böhl, *Zwölf Messianische Psalmen: Nebst einer grundlegenden christologischen Einleitung* (Basel: Bahnmaier's Verlag, 1862).

¹¹⁰ Bernhard Baehring, *Bunsen's Bibelwerk nach feiner Bedeutung für die Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Brodhaus, 1861).

¹¹¹ Ferdinand Hitzig, *Die Psalmen: Uebersetzt und Ausgelegt*, 2 vols. (Leipzig und Heidelberg: C. F. Wintersche, 1863–1865).

¹¹² Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:vi: "Hitzig's new Commentary has been of the greatest service to me in the revision and reworking of my own. In it I found mine uniformly taken into account from beginning to end, either with or without direct mention, and subject to severe but kindly-disposed criticism; and here and there not without a ready recognition of the scientific advance which could not but be observed in it."

¹¹³ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:243–44. Delitzsch, 1:243, also appears to provide a general subtitle for this psalm which Kretzmann quoted in his "popular" commentary: "The Christian's Golden A B C of the praise, love, power, and use of the word of God."

¹¹⁴ *DBWE* 5:164; *DBW* 5:118, 119.

Notable in this statement is the way that Bonhoeffer situates this psalm in a theological rather than an historical context. Additionally, he readily inserts a Christ-focused perspective in contrast to Delitzsch, whose comments generally lack of this type of emphasis. Even with the observable change in Bonhoeffer's Christological approach to this psalm, he is nonetheless still more willing than Delitzsch to explore the relationship of Jesus Christ to the church-community's interpretation of this psalm.

One other distinct characteristic of Delitzsch's commentary—a characteristic not at all present in Bonhoeffer's commentary—is his frequent interaction with the contributions of other Psalm scholars. For example, he cites his disagreement with Koster, von Gerlach, Hengstenberg, and Hupfield whom he believes “renounce all attempts to show that there is any accordance whatever with a set plan, and [instead] find here a series of maxims without any internal progression and connection.”¹¹⁵ Delitzsch's work, unlike Bonhoeffer's, is technical and “scientific” (his own description),¹¹⁶ demanding strong knowledge of biblical HB and demonstrating a thorough understanding of the Bible's intertextuality.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Bonhoeffer's unfinished commentary on Ps 119 remains an important part of his collected works and of his writings on the Psalms. It demonstrates a form of commentary-style writing that was not immediately intended for the seminary classroom or the pulpit. Yet this commentary does share a number of characteristics common to the exegetical approach he took toward

¹¹⁵ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:243. Throughout his commentary, Delitzsch maintains this type of on-going dialogue with and critique of other scholars.

¹¹⁶ See Delitzsch's preface to the three volumes on the Psalms in vol. 1, v–vii.

¹¹⁷ Delitzsch's commentary often references other portions of Scripture including other verses within Ps 119 and within the Old Testament. This intertextual work is performed as an aid to understanding the meaning of the words and phrases used by the psalmist.

instructional and homiletical writings on the Psalms during the Finkenwalde era. Included in this list are the commentary's verse-by-verse format by which he proceeds through the psalm, the interpretive approach he employs which emphasizes the text's theological meaning over against its original context or technical literary characteristics, and an application of the psalm which emphasizes a concern for the spiritual enrichment of his audience. Despite these characteristics, which might be considered typical for Bonhoeffer's exegesis of the Psalms after his arrival at Finkenwalde, his commentary also demonstrates a number of characteristics which should be seen as different from other writings. This list includes his interaction with HB vocabulary as well as his attempts at offering a "literal" rendering of the HB text. The greatest change, however, is seen in the way he alters his two-part hermeneutic of the relationship of the psalm to prayer and to Jesus Christ. Both prongs of this hermeneutical approach appear less distinct and, thus, less in-line with his earlier approach. For example, his discussion of the psalm's relationship to prayer contains no insistence on praying the psalm in order to produce a proper understanding of it. Nor is there a call in this commentary for the church-community to join in communal praying of this psalm—this, despite the example he observed of this practice in his 1935 Anglican monastery visits. In terms of his unique Christological exegesis of this, his favorite psalm, Bonhoeffer avoids any recapitulation of his earlier emphasis on Jesus praying the Psalter in his incarnation. This is most striking, particularly when set against what he wrote in *Life Together* and what he taught in his "Christus in den Psalmen" lecture. It is unclear, and perhaps impossible to prove, whether these observations mark a permanent change in Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms, or if this was simply an emphasis he chose to delay or dismiss in this particular writing.¹¹⁸ A look at his interpretation of the Psalms

¹¹⁸ The fact that this commentary was only partial and clearly unfinished means that Bonhoeffer may have had plans to insert this aspect later, as he worked to complete and finalize the commentary.

during the last years of his life—a task which I now turn my attention—may shed light on this question.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PSALMS AS THE PRAYERBOOK FOR LIFE: AN ANALYSIS OF BONHOEFFER'S USE OF THE PSALMS DURING HIS IMPRISONMENT (1943–45)

Introduction

The final body of work that deserves attention in this sustained study of Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms is his collection of writings from the final years of his life in Nazi imprisonment (1943–1945). This corpus of writing is found within two volumes of Bonhoeffer's collected works: *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945*¹ and *Letters and Papers from Prison*.² Numerous notes, essays, sermons, meditations, and poems allow us to trace the development of Bonhoeffer's theological reflection during this time—from the earliest days of his imprisonment at Tegel Military Prison (Apr 1943) through his stay at Prinz-Albrecht-Straße in the early weeks of 1945, after which time we have no further record of Bonhoeffer's writings or correspondence.³ Additional insight can be gained from the voluminous body of personal correspondence shared between Bonhoeffer and his family and friends on the “outside.” Together this collection gives evidence to Bethge's claim that despite the inherent hardships and limitations of imprisonment, this period of Bonhoeffer's life was arguably the most prolific period of his life.⁴ The impetus for much of his innovative theological inquiry was not only his

¹ *DBWE* 16; *DBW* 16.

² *DBWE* 8; *DBW* 8.

³ The last known correspondence from Bonhoeffer was a letter he wrote on January 17, 1945 to his parents, Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer (*DBWE* 8:552–53; *DBW* 8:610–11). See the Chronology of Bonhoeffer's life, xix–xxv of this Dissertation.

⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 829: “We have more writings by Bonhoeffer from the eighteen months in this cell than we have from any other period of his life; they include notes, letters, scholarly and literary writings.”

personal trials, but also the troubling state of the church and its witness under the growing Nazi oppression. Notably, it was the Old Testament, including the book of Psalms, that increasingly served as the object of his theological and exegetical meditation during these months.

Since the mid-twentieth century, several scholars have given attention to this collection of Bonhoeffer's "letters and papers from prison" with the purpose of mining their content for insight into his new and developing theological and intellectual epiphanies.⁵ The publication of *DBWE 16: Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945* in 2006 and *DBWE 8: Letters and Papers from Prison* in 2010 served many of these publications.⁶ Yet none of these new works have included in them a discussion of Bonhoeffer's use of the Psalms from this period. In this current chapter, I will provide such a survey and will thus complete the journey of this dissertation by exploring the shape of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms beyond the academic setting of the 1920's and 1930's into the prison context of the last two years of his life. I will build on previous chapters as I analyze Bonhoeffer's imprisonment use of the Psalms in light of his demonstrated two-pronged hermeneutic. I will assess the changing shape of his approach, with a keen eye toward his use of psalms and psalm-types which he has previously discussed. I will also look for new or alternate exegetical and interpretive methods that may have been brought on by the extreme circumstances of his arrest, imprisonment, and interrogation.

⁵ See, for example, *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. Martin Marty (New York: Association, 1962); Kuske, *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ*; Hannelis Schulte, "In den Tatsachen selbst is Gott. Die Bedeutung des Alten Testaments für die christliche Verkündigung nach D. Bonhoeffer letzten Briefen," *EvT* 22, no. 8 (Aug 1962): 441–48.

⁶ Clifford J. Green, "Bonhoeffer's Contribution to a New Christian Paradigm" in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues*, ed. Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013); *Bonhoeffer and Interpretive Theory: Essays on Methods and Understanding*, ed. Peter Frick (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013); John W. de Gruchy, "Bonhoeffer's Quest for Authentic Christianity. Beyond Fundamentalism, Nationalism, Religion and Secularism" in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology Today*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, Stephen Plant, and Christiane Tietz (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009); Keith L. Johnson and Timothy Larson, eds., *Bonhoeffer, Christ, and Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013); Martin E. Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Bernd Wannewetsch, ed., *Who Am I? Bonhoeffer's Theology through His Poetry* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

I will begin this chapter by first identifying all uses Bonhoeffer made of the Psalms during the time of his imprisonment. These will be drawn from *DBWE/DBW* 8 and *DBWE/DBW* 16.⁷ Once I have identified and listed these uses, I will then sort them according to three different categories: the genre of the source document in which they appear, the general theme or heading from which they come (as based on the categories Bonhoeffer assigned them in *Prayerbook*), and the date on which they were cited. These results will be presented in separate tables. Each will be followed by a descriptive analysis of their data.⁸ After this data has been presented and discussed, I will then choose three of Bonhoeffer's uses of the Psalms from this list that offer more clarity in terms of their interpretive moves, and I will examine them more closely for their contribution to an understanding of Bonhoeffer's interpretation and appropriation of the Psalms during these final years of his life.

A Brief Historical Background to Bonhoeffer's Arrest

As Bethge notes, the events of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life between 1940 and his arrest in the spring of 1943 are difficult to trace and thus "can be only approximately reconstructed."⁹ Following several years of secretly working to advance the cause of the Confessing Church, while also holding an official position as a member of the Military Intelligence Office,¹⁰ Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo on Apr 5, 1943 on suspicion of participation in illegal

⁷ More detail will be provided below as to how I will define these uses. The number of references to the Psalms in the *Index of Scriptural References* from *DBWE* 8 and *DBWE* 16 list over one hundred uses. However, many of these appear in editor's footnote and/or do not constitute actual or substantive uses of the Psalms by Bonhoeffer himself.

⁸ Space does not allow, at this point, an exhaustive treatment of *all* of Bonhoeffer's uses of the Psalms. Instead, what I will do is speak more broadly about the nature of his use of the Psalms in each genre of writing, while isolating a few representative examples from the respective list.

⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 686.

¹⁰ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 695–705.

activities involving his role in the Military Intelligence Office (or *Abwehr*).¹¹ He was placed in the military prison in Tegel (in Berlin) and immediately housed on the third floor alongside death row inmates. During his initial weeks of imprisonment, he faced regular interrogations, horrid living conditions, and repeated insults from interrogators and guards.¹² Despite the constant threat to his mental and physical wellbeing, Bonhoeffer persevered and learned to adapt his way of life to the foreboding experience of imprisonment. His many biographers report that it was Bonhoeffer's intellectual sharpness along with his well-developed personal and spiritual habits that sustained him during this time.¹³ Bosanquet remarks that, "From the first days in the prison he continued the steady discipline of his Christian life: meditation, intercession and thanksgiving, the daily 'praying' of the Psalms and Bible study."¹⁴ Bonhoeffer remained at Tegel until Oct 8, 1944, at which time he was transferred to the Gestapo prison at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse in Berlin. His last preserved letter was written to his parents and was dated Jan 17, 1945. He was transferred four more times between Feb and Apr 1945, and on Apr 8, 1945 Bonhoeffer was

¹¹ Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 244, states that the charges against Bonhoeffer were not given at the time of his arrest; nor were they clearly defined in the coming days. See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 780–87, for a description of the events of Bonhoeffer's arrest and initial interrogations at Tegel Military Prison.

¹² Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 323–24. Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 326, speaks of Bonhoeffer's experience of "prison shock," that was only slightly relieved when his mother's cousin (General Paul von Hase), the city commander in Berlin who was in charge of the prison, inquired of the "status" of his nephew (see Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 812–13).

¹³ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 828–34; Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 323–28; *DBWE* 8:12–13. Bonhoeffer spoke of the importance of a disciplined life in prison in a December 18, 1943 letter to Bethge, *DBWE* 8: 227; *DBW* 8: 243, "The first result of such periods of longing is always that one wishes to neglect the normal course of the day in some way; thus a certain disorder creeps into your life. I was sometimes tempted simply not to get up at six in the morning as usual—which would certainly have been possible—and instead to sleep longer. Up to now I have still been able to force myself not to give in to this temptation; it was clear to me that this would have been the beginning of capitulation from which presumably worse things would have followed."

¹⁴ Bosanquet, *Bonhoeffer*, 248–49. Schlingensiepen, *Bonhoeffer*, 325, adds: "During this early phase of his imprisonment, nothing helped Bonhoeffer more than his acquaintance with the monastic life and his own experiences of it in Finkenwalde and Ettal. A monk also lives in a 'cell', and knows life in two modes, the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, the active life and the life of contemplation and prayer. Bonhoeffer had been torn from his active from one day to the next. He had not chosen to lie in a cell as he now was obliged to do; but he succeeded in transforming the *vita contemplativa* that had been forced upon him into one that he could affirm with his inner being and thus overcame the 'prison shock.'"

abruptly court-martialed and hanged at the Flossenbürg concentration camp, along with several other individuals accused of being involved in the resistance movement.

Bonhoeffer's Use of the Psalms During His Imprisonment

Organization of Data

A survey of Bonhoeffer's use of the Psalms from the period of his imprisonment reveals dozens of quotations, citations and allusions. From this list, I have determined that there are forty occurrences of the Psalms which should be considered substantive for use in this analysis. These forty uses are all references to or quotations of a psalm text by Bonhoeffer. In addition, there are another thirteen Psalm occurrences provided by the editors of these volumes, which demonstrate, with very high probability, the likelihood that Bonhoeffer was directly citing or referencing a psalm text. These editorial uses occur either in the editor's forward, the editor's afterword, or the editorial footnotes (*DBWE* only).¹⁵ In Table 5.1, I will present in full every substantive use of the Psalms from *DBWE/DBW* 8 and *DBWE/DBW* 16. In Tables 5.2–5.5, I will arrange these uses according to the genre of their source in Bonhoeffer's works (i.e., personal letter, devotional writing, homiletical writing, or doctrinal writing). Table 5.6 will show how these psalm uses break down according to the thematic categories Bonhoeffer identified in *Prayerbook*. Finally, in Table 5.7, I will arrange the full set of psalm uses chronologically, according to the date on which Bonhoeffer made use of them.¹⁶

¹⁵ In my evaluation of these editorial uses, I have intentionally eliminated references such as those which point to *possible* allusions or cross-references to other Psalm texts or writings by Bonhoeffer. I have also excluded a large number of editorial references to the Psalms which do not contribute anything substantial to an understanding of Bonhoeffer's interpretation or appropriation of the Psalms in his imprisonment. An example of this latter type of occurrence is found in *DBWE* 8:400; *DBW* 8:448 where, in a letter written to Renate and Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer mentions that he had been "trying to write [them] a few words on the *Daily Texts*." The editor then lists the texts to which Bonhoeffer was referring (the *Daily Texts* for May 29, 1944)—Ps 94:12–13a and Gal 5:22–23a. While interesting information to know, this psalm citation does not contribute anything to a study of how Bonhoeffer actually interpreted the verses of this psalm.

¹⁶ In the case of an editor's use of a Psalms text, the use will be dated according to the date of the Bonhoeffer

Table 5.1. Full List of Uses of the Psalms from the Time of Bonhoeffer's Imprisonment

REFERENCE	DATE OF USAGE	GENRE OF SOURCE	DBWE [DBW] CITATION
Psalms	Apr 25, 1943	Personal Letter	8:63 [52]
	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
	Nov 18, 1943	Personal Letter	8:180 [187]
	Nov 20, 1943	Personal Letter	8:187 [196]
	Jan 23, 1944	Personal Letter	8:269 [292]
Ps 3	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
Ps 9:19–20 [HB 20–21]	Apr 30, 1944	Personal Letter	8:361 [402]
Ps 13:1 [HB 2]	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:80 [71]
Ps 18:29 [HB 30]	Dec 22, 1943	Personal Letter	8:235 [252]
<i>Ps 18:30 [HB 31]</i>	<i>Dec 22, 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	8:236
<i>Ps 20:7 [HB 8]</i>	<i>July 21, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	8:485
<i>Ps 22:12 [13]</i>	<i>Jan 23, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	8:269
<i>Ps 23:1</i>	<i>July 21, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	8:485
<i>Ps 25:17</i>	<i>Jan 23, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	8:269
<i>Ps 27:4</i>	<i>Dec 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	8:231
Ps 30:5 [HB 6]	May 1944	Homily	8:389 [435]
Ps 31:15 [HB 16]	May 1943	Notes	8:72 [62]
	May 1943	Notes	8:73 [63]
	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:80 [70]
	Nov 1943	Prayers	8:196 [206]
	<i>N/A</i>	<i>Editor: Afterword</i>	8:582 [644]
<i>Ps 32:7</i>	<i>Jan 23, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	8:269
<i>Ps 34:19 [HB 20]</i>	June 7–8, 1944	Devotional	16:631 [657]
<i>Ps 34:20 [HB 21]</i>	<i>July 28, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	8:493
Ps 37:3	June 5, 1944	Personal Letter	8:415 [466]
Ps 42:6 [HB7]	July 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:475 [529]
Ps 47	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
	Nov 20, 1943	Personal Letter	8:187 [195]
Ps 50:15	Jan 29–30, 1944	Personal Letter	8:276 [300–01]
Ps 54:4 [HB 6]	June 7–8, 1944	Devotional	16:629 [654]
Ps 58:11 [HB 12]	Apr 30, 1944	Personal Letter	8:361 [402]
Ps 60:2 [HB 4]	Sept 5, 1943	Personal Letter	8:150 [152]
Ps 60:12 [HB 13]	Dec 22, 1943	Personal Letter	8:236 [253]
Ps 62:2 [HB 3]	July 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:475 [529]
<i>Ps 68:19 [HB 20]</i>	<i>May 4, 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	8:66
<i>Ps 68:20 [HB 21]</i>	<i>May 4, 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	8:66
Ps 70	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
	Nov 20, 1943	Personal Letter	8:187 [195]
Ps 75:1 [HB 2]	June-July 1944	Doctrinal	16:640 [667]
Ps 90:14	May 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:381 [425]

document it references.

Ps 91:11	June 5, 1944	Personal Letter	8:417 [467]
	June 7–8, 1944	Devotional	16:631 [656]
Ps 94:12–13	May 28–30, 1944	Devotional	16:627 [652]
<i>Ps 95:7-8</i>	<i>Nov 27, 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:201</i>
Ps 119:32	June–July 1944	Doctrinal	16:637 [663]
Ps 119:92	June–July 1944	Doctrinal	16:636 [662–63]
Ps 119:94	July 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:475 [529]
	<i>July 16, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:475</i>
Ps 121:6	June 27, 1944	Personal Letter	8:448 [501]
Ps 127:1–2	June–July 1944	Doctrinal	16:643 [670]
Ps 127:3	May 15, 1943	Homily	8:86 [78]
Ps 144:1	May 1944	Homily	8:388 [434]
Ps 147:20	June–July 1944	Doctrinal	16:636 [662]

Bonhoeffer’s Use of the Psalms During His Imprisonment: by Genre of Source

During Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment he was given surprising access to family, friends, and colleagues outside the prison through personal visits and written correspondence.¹⁷ He was also allowed ample opportunity to read and write in his cell, although he often had to obtain his own writing supplies.¹⁸ In addition to personal letters, Bonhoeffer also penned a number of devotional reflections, sermons, and doctrinal writings. He kept track of to-do’s and various ideas in the form of notes, expressed himself creatively through poetic writings, and even composed (at the request of the prison chaplain) written prayers for fellow-prisoners.¹⁹ Each of these types of writing reflects a different style and purpose. Bonhoeffer’s use of psalms within these various genre, therefore, demonstrates various levels of exegetical interaction with the biblical text. In the following section, I will break down the full list of Psalms uses from Table 5.1 according to the four most common types of writing in which Bonhoeffer employed them: personal letters

¹⁷ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 847–49. While much of Bonhoeffer’s correspondence was sifted through by Nazi officials and guards, other correspondence was transported secretly by officials sympathetic to Bonhoeffer’s case (see, for example *DBWE* 8:553n 7).

¹⁸ See *DBWE* 8:136; *DBW* 8:135.

¹⁹ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 849–50.

(Table 5.2), devotional writings (Table 5.3), homiletical writings (Table 5.4), and doctrinal writings (Table 5.5). Following each table, I will comment on Bonhoeffer’s use of the Psalms in that genre of writing and discuss how Bonhoeffer’s interpretive approach here relates to his earlier methods of interpreting the Psalms.

Bonhoeffer’s Use of the Psalms in His Personal Letters

Table 5.2. Bonhoeffer’s Use of the Psalms in His Personal Letters

REFERENCE	DATE OF USAGE	GENRE OF SOURCE	DBWE [DBW] CITATION
Psalms	Apr 25, 1943	Personal Letter	8:63 [52]
	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
	Nov 18, 1943	Personal Letter	8:180 [187]
	Jan 23, 1944	Personal Letter	8:269 [292]
Ps 3	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
Ps 9:19–20 [HB 20–21]	Apr 30, 1944	Personal Letter	8:361 [402]
Ps 13:1 [HB 2]	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:80 [71]
Ps 18:29 [HB 30]	Dec 22, 1943	Personal Letter	8:235 [252]
<i>Ps 18:30 [HB 31]</i>	<i>Dec 22, 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:236</i>
<i>Ps 20:7 [HB 8]</i>	<i>July 21, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:485</i>
<i>Ps 22:12 [13]</i>	<i>Jan 23, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:269</i>
<i>Ps 23:1</i>	<i>July 21, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:485</i>
<i>Ps 25:17</i>	<i>Jan 23, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:269</i>
<i>Ps 27:4</i>	<i>Dec 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:231</i>
Ps 31:15 [HB 16]	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:80 [70]
	N/A	Editor: Afterword	8:582 [644]
Ps 37:3	June 5, 1944	Personal Letter	8:415 [466]
Ps 42:6 [HB7]	July 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:475 [529]
Ps 47	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
	Nov 20, 1943	Personal Letter	8:187 [195]
Ps 50:15	Jan 29–30, 1944	Personal Letter	8:276 [300–01]
Ps 58:11 [HB 12]	Apr 30, 1944	Personal Letter	8:361 [402]
Ps 60:2 [HB 4]	Sept 5, 1943	Personal Letter	8:150 [152]
Ps 60:12 [HB 13]	Dec 22, 1943	Personal Letter	8:236 [253]
Ps 62:2 [HB 3]	July 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:475 [529]
Ps 68:19 [HB 20]	May 4, 1943	Editor: Footnote	8:66
Psa 68:20 [HB 21]	May 4, 1943	Editor: Footnote	8:66
Ps 70	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]

	Nov 20, 1943	Personal Letter	8:187 [195]
Ps 90:14	May 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:381 [425]
Ps 91:11	June 5, 1944	Personal Letter	8:417 [467]
Ps 95:7-8	Nov 27, 1943	Editor: Footnote	8:201
Ps 119:94	July 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:475 [529]
	July 16, 1944	Editor: Footnote	8:475
Ps 121:6	June 27, 1944	Personal Letter	8:448 [501]

The genre of writing in which Bonhoeffer’s use of the Psalms most frequently occurs is his personal correspondence.²⁰ This fact is not necessarily determined by a higher than normal use of the Psalms within this type of writing as much as it reflects the fact that a significant majority of the extant documents we have from this period are personal letters to and from Bonhoeffer’s family, friends, and colleagues. A survey of the data in Table 5.2 shows that the majority of Bonhoeffer’s uses of the Psalms in his personal correspondence (twenty-five out of thirty-five occurrences) come from the first seventy psalms, a canonical collection of Psalms traditionally recognized as “Davidic Psalms.”²¹ The superscriptions attached to many of these psalms associate them with David and specific events in his life,²² and give expression to his protests, complaints, and laments over the activity of his adversaries against him.²³ David’s “enemies”—variously described in these psalms as אֹיִב, צָר, שׂוֹרֵר, and רֶשֶׁע—are also portrayed as the

²⁰ Bonhoeffer’s personal correspondence includes thirty-five occurrences of the Psalms, out of the forty I’ve isolated in *DBWE/DBW* 8 and *DBWE/DBW* 16.

²¹ The first two books of the Psalter (encompassing Pss 1–41; 42–70) contain the highest concentration of psalms attributed in their superscription to David (דָּוִד). Psalms without attribution in these first two books include Pss 1, 2, 10, 33, 66, 67, and 71. Ps 43 has no superscription but is traditionally recognized as attached to Ps 42, which is attributed to the Sons of Korah. Psalms of alternate attribution (other than David) include Pss 42–49 (Sons of Korah), 50 (Asaph), 72 (Solomon). Although the last phrase of Ps 72 would seem to suggest that the Davidic psalms end with Ps 72, others are found in latter psalms (e.g., Pss 86, 101, 103, 108–10, 122, 124, 131, 133, and 138–45). Of these Davidic psalms Bonhoeffer only cites Ps 144 (see *DBWE* 8:388; *DBW* 8:434).

²² On the topic of the authenticity and function of the psalms’ superscriptions see Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 10–32; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 21–32; William L. Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 70–76.

²³ See, for example, Pss 3, 18, 34, 51, 52, 56, 59, 60, 63.

enemies of God (e.g., Ps 5:4–5 [HB 5–6]; 7:10–12 [HB11–13]; 9:19–20 [HB 20–21]). In these psalms, David cries out for deliverance from a foe who is stronger than he is, yet not stronger than God. Despite the fierceness or power or number or advances of the wicked against David, God remains for him a rock (Ps 18:31 [HB 32]; 31:3 [HB 4]; 62:2 [HB 3]), a shield (Ps 3:3 [HB 4]; 18:30 [HB 31]) and a sure refuge (see Ps 18:30 [HB 31]; 46:1 [HB 2]; 68:19 [HB 20]; 70:1, 5 [HB 2, 6]). As attacks come, God acts to relieve the burdens of David, his anointed (Ps 68:19 [HB 20]), and to deliver him from the grip of defeat (Ps 18:17 [HB 18]; 31:15 [HB 16]; 50:15; 60:12 [HB 14]; 68:20 [HB 21]).

Bonhoeffer's frequent use of Davidic psalms in his personal letters suggests that he recognized in them a correlation between David's experiences and his own. Bonhoeffer offers no explicit statement of intentionality, yet reveals nonetheless through his use of these psalms that he sought from them the same encouragement, comfort, and deliverance in his own experiences of *Anfechtung*.²⁴ In a period of time when he experienced severe oppression and was tempted to succumb to faithlessness, doubt, fear, and anxiety,²⁵ these Davidic psalms served to infuse courage and hope. They gave Bonhoeffer faith-filled words on which to meditate and which he could pray. Consequently, his use of them led him to express trust in and submission to God's will, no matter the temporal outcome. Bonhoeffer's meditation on the psalms during his imprisonment was a soothing balm to his anxious soul.

This fact can be observed in his citation of Ps 18:29 [HB 30] in a letter to Eberhard Bethge

²⁴ *Anfechtung* has been variously translated as "temptation," "trials," "tribulation," and "affliction." For a more in-depth discussion of the meaning of *Anfechtung*, particularly as Luther understood it, see David P. Scaer, "The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought," *CTQ* 47, no. 1 (Jan 1983): 15–30.

²⁵ In a letter to Eberhard Bethge on Dec 22, 1943 (*DBWE* 8:235; *DBW* 8:251), Bonhoeffer explains his tendency to withhold the facts of his imprisonment and his true feelings of fear and doubt from his parents and fiancé: "For the first time in nine months, I will be allowed to speak and hear the complete truth [about his imprisonment and the potential for his release]. That is an event. I am obliged to protect my parents and Maria; with you I will put on no pretense, nor you with me. We never did so earlier and don't ever wish to do."

on December 22, 1943:

What matters to me is really [not] the more or less childish question of whether I will be home for Christmas; what matters decisively is not even that I would like to be together with Maria undisturbed and that I would like to discuss many things once more with you before your departure. To be sure, these things matter to me very much, but I believe I could gladly give them up if I could do so “in faith” and if I knew that it had to be so. “In faith” I can bear everything (—I hope—), even a conviction, even the other dreaded consequences (Ps. 18:29), but an anxious outlook wears one down. Please don’t worry about me if something worse occurs. Other brethren have gone through it already. But a faithless wavering back and forth, an endless consulting without action, a shrinking from risk, that is a real danger. I must be able to have the certainty that I am in God’s hand and not in human hands. Then everything will become easy, even the hardest privation.²⁶

Ps 18:29 [HB 30] reads, “For in you I can run [against] a troop; and in my God I can leap a wall.” Bonhoeffer sought courage and hope from this verse, which emboldened him to face the anxiety produced by the thought of possible torture at the hands of his captors.

The benefit that came from this specific psalm verse is also attributed to his use of the Psalms, in general. When reflecting on his early adjustments to captivity on Nov 18, 1943, Bonhoeffer writes the following to Eberhard Bethge:

In the first twelve days [at Tegel], during which I was kept isolated and treated as a dangerous criminal—to this day the cells on either side of mine are occupied almost exclusively by death-row prisoners in chains—Paul Gerhardt proved of value in unimagined ways, as well as the Psalms and Revelation. I was preserved in those days from all severe temptations [Anfechtungen].²⁷

He also states the following in a letter to his parents dated May 15, 1943, just one month into his imprisonment:

By the way, I am reading the Bible straight through from the beginning and am just coming to Job, whom I especially love. I am also still reading the Psalms daily as I have done for years. There is no other book that I know and love as much. I am no longer able to read Pss. 3, 47, 70, and others without hearing them in the musical

²⁶ *DBWE* 8:235; *DBW* 8:252.

²⁷ See *DBWE* 8:63, 81, 180; *DBW* 8:52, 72, 187.

settings by Heinrich Schütz. Thanks to Renate, who introduced me to this music; it has become one of the greatest enrichments of my life.²⁸

The Psalms clearly provide comfort for Bonhoeffer in the midst of his experiences of *Anfechtung*. They do so by affirming God’s nearness and by affirming God’s ability to give Bonhoeffer what he needs to preserve in his current and future trials. All of this is expressed through an interpretive lens which emphasizes the analogous relationship of Bonhoeffer’s experiences to the psalmist’s experiences. What is wanting interpretively, however, is the particular emphasis he gave in his “Christus in den Psalmen” lecture on the reality of Jesus Christ praying these same psalms in his incarnation. Why Bonhoeffer avoids this connection is uncertain, as it would seem to strengthen his faith even more to recognize that Jesus, too, went through experiences of *Anfechtung*, and yet God was a helper to him—ultimately seeing Jesus through his trials and suffering on the cross to the resurrection. Bonhoeffer, here, does not bring this interpretive conviction to bear on his reading of the psalm but instead tends to keep his focus on its analogous historical and theological context, thus restraining the form of his Christ-focused perspective expressed at Finkenwalde.

Bonhoeffer’s Use of the Psalms in His Devotional Writings

Table 5.3. Bonhoeffer’s Use of the Psalms in His Devotional Writings (from the *Daily Texts*)

REFERENCE	DATE OF USAGE	GENRE OF SOURCE	DBWE [DBW] CITATION
Ps 34:19 [HB 20]	June 7–8, 1944	Devotional	16:631 [657]
<i>Ps 34:20 [HB 21]</i>	<i>July 28, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:493</i>
Ps 54:4	June 7–8, 1944	Devotional	16:629 [654]
Ps 91:11	June 7–8, 1944	Devotional	16:631 [656]
Ps 94:12–13	May 28–30, 1944	Devotional	16:627 [652]

Bonhoeffer began the practice of daily Scripture meditation and prayer in the years prior to

²⁸ *DBWE* 8:81; *DBW* 8:72.

Finkenwalde. Following his monastery visits in the spring of 1935 this discipline took on both a more regimented and corporate nature within the *Bruderhaus* at Finkenwalde. Evidence shows that after the spring of 1935, the main source of Bonhoeffer's daily Scripture meditation was the Moravian Church's *Losungen* or *Daily Texts*.²⁹ His references to the *Daily Texts* within his personal correspondence from 1935 onward grows in frequency,³⁰ even through the months of his imprisonment.³¹ Bonhoeffer not only shared this list of Scripture readings with others, but he also passed along devotional reflections on these texts to his students, friends, and family. John W. de Gruchy observes that these *Losungen* "texts, frequently referred to in his letters, helped [Bonhoeffer] to discern meaning and purpose in what was happening around him as well as to him."³² The sizeable number of references to the *Losungen* in his letters and papers from prison (see especially *DBWE* 8) gives evidence of his on-going practice of daily reading and reflection on them.

Despite these descriptions of Bonhoeffer's regular use of the *Losungen* from his biographers, it is observable from Table 5.3 that Bonhoeffer's formal writing of devotional reflections on these texts dropped significantly during his imprisonment. This table reveals a

²⁹ *DBWE* 5:58; *DBW* 5:43n 27: "The "Daily Texts of the Church of the Brethren" (*Losungen der Brüdergemeine*) are small meditation books with a short Bible text from the Old Testament (*Losung*) and a selected passage from the New Testament (*Lehrtext*) for every day of the year, as well as a verse from a hymn or a short prayer text. It was in the Herrnhut settlement of Saxony founded in 1722 by Moravian emigrants that, in 1728, Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf permitted, for the first time, a Bible text to be proclaimed in their homes as the maxim (*Parole*) for the day. The "Daily Texts" were, from their first publication in 1731, printed up for one year at a time. They have appeared each year since then without interruption."

³⁰ The earliest noted use of the Moravian *Daily Texts* by Bonhoeffer was in August of 1928. Clifford Green, *DBWE* 10: Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 511n 1, states that Bonhoeffer's August 12, 1928 sermon on Matt 5:8 from Barcelona was "presumably taken from the Moravian Daily Texts for August 5, 1928."

³¹ The English edition of Bonhoeffer's works show an increasing reference to the *Daily Texts*, particularly from 1937 onward. They are referenced over ten times in *DBWE* 15: *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, while the two volumes from 1940–1945 (*DBWE* 16 and *DBWE* 8) contain over twenty references. The only other volume in which Bonhoeffer speaks of the *Daily Texts* is *DBWE/DBW* 5: *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*.

³² *DBWE* 8:12. See also *DBWE* 5:14–16.

window of time in the late spring and early summer of 1944 during which he concentrated his efforts toward this type of writing. It should be noted, however, that although the number of uses of psalm texts in this genre are fewer than in Bonhoeffer's personal letters, their use within this genre of writing tends to present a clearer picture of his interpretation. This will be demonstrated below in my discussion his use of Ps 34:19 [HB 20]; 54:4 and 91:11 in his June 7–8, 1944 devotional writings. For now, I will simply comment briefly on Bonhoeffer's use of Ps 94:12–13 in his May 29, 1944 devotional.

The *Losungen* texts for May 29, 1944 were Ps 94:12–13 and Gal 5:22–23a. As is typical with this devotional guide, the first text selection is one that often speaks a word of encouragement and promise from the Old Testament. The second selection often presents a doctrinal or teaching point aligned to the same theme. This relationship can be readily observed in these two biblical texts. Bonhoeffer picks up on this pairing by emphasizing the mutually-referenced characteristic of patience, which he says, “has been the focus recently of nearly our entire inner concentration.”³³ The Christian believer learns patience, Bonhoeffer suggests, “[b]y submitting to God's blows and God's law and saying, Happy are those who experience this! ... Those whom God disciplines through difficult life experiences, through war and deprivation, learn that they can insist on nothing from God; so they wait patiently and humbly until God again turns toward them kindly, and they know that this hour is coming.”³⁴ In a move reminiscent of his treatment of Ps 58:1–3, Bonhoeffer speaks of the “shared guilt” of believers “in the failure of all human beings,” but then emphasizes the faith-response of Christians to this judgment, who “know that God is teaching us, ... and [who] recognize the hand of the dear Father and say,

³³ *DBWE* 16:627; *DBW* 16:652. Bonhoeffer is writing these devotional reflections to Eberhard and Renate Bethge (see *DBWE* 16:626n 1).

³⁴ *DWE* 16:627–28; *DBW* 16:652.

Happy are those who experience this.”³⁵

Bonhoeffer’s devotional use of the Psalms in his imprisonment writings exhibit a number of shared characteristics, some of which are noticeably out-of-sync with his earlier approach. First, nowhere in these uses of the Psalms does Bonhoeffer comment on *entire* psalm chapters. This was a prominent feature of Bonhoeffer’s more mature exegesis of the Psalms particularly from his Finkenwalde period onward. As I stated in chapter two, it was most likely influenced by his 1935 monastery visits. The “truncated” interaction with psalm texts seen during his imprisonment may not, however, reflect a true change in Bonhoeffer’s approach toward the Psalms or toward his daily practice of prayer and meditation. Rather, this may result from his primary dependence on the *Losungen*’s choice of shorter pericope. Nonetheless, this choice of shorter texts from the Psalms is a consistent marker of his imprisonment use on the Psalms.

Second, an unmistakable characteristics of Bonhoeffer’s devotional use of the Psalms from this period is his tendency to bring out the cruciform aspects in the verse(s). From Ps 94:12–13a we are called to bear God’s chastisement and to obey his law, and to receive this as fatherly discipline from God. From Ps 54:4 we are reminded that we have God as our helper even as (and, perhaps, especially because) we go through times which cause us to doubt God’s presence with us.³⁶ This repeated emphasis on submitting to God by submitting our will to others is especially present in Bonhoeffer’s reflections on these devotional “watchwords.”

Bonhoeffer’s Use of the Psalms in His Homiletical Writings

Table 5.4. Bonhoeffer’s Use of the Psalms in His Homiletical Writings

REFERENCE	DATE OF	GENRE OF	DBWE [DBW]
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³⁵ *DBWE* 16:628; *DBW* 16:652.

³⁶ See *DBWE* 16:629–31; *DBW* 16:654–56.

	USAGE	SOURCE	CITATION
Ps 30:5	May 1944	Homily	8:389 [435]
Ps 127:3	May 15, 1943	Homily	8:86 [78]
Ps 144:1	May 1944	Homily	8:388 [434]

Unlike the use of psalms in Bonhoeffer’s personal correspondence, which often appears to be somewhat spontaneous in nature,³⁷ his use of psalm texts in his imprisonment homilies is marked by an ample amount of forethought and intentionality. We have record of two different sermons that Bonhoeffer wrote while in prison. The first is a wedding sermon which he wrote for the wedding of his friend Eberhard Bethge to Bonhoeffer’s sister, Renate. In this sermon, dated May 15, 1943,³⁸ Bonhoeffer sets forth a number of key points including, “God is the founder of your marriage,”³⁹ “God makes your marriage indissoluble,”⁴⁰ “God establishes an order within which you are able to live together in marriage,”⁴¹ “God has endowed marriage with a blessing and with a burden,”⁴² and “God gives you Christ as the foundation of your marriage.”⁴³ It is in his comments on the “blessing” and “burden” of marriage that he cites Ps 127:3.

Bonhoeffer had earlier preached on this same psalm, but in that instance, he focused his message solely on v. 1.⁴⁴ In this current sermon, he concentrates exclusively on v. 3, “Behold, children are the gift of YHWH.” He states: “‘Children are a gift from the Lord’ (Ps. 127:3), and we ought to recognize them as such. It is from God that parents receive their children, and it is to

³⁷ This comment is not meant to diminish the thoughtfulness with which Bonhoeffer quotes or references the Psalms in his personal correspondence. As will be demonstrated below, he often shows evidence of deep reflection on psalm texts prior to his use of them in his personal letters (see especially his reflections on Ps 13:1 and Ps 31:15).

³⁸ *DBWE* 8:82–87; *DBW* 8:73–80

³⁹ *DBWE* 8:83–84; *DBW* 8:75–76.

⁴⁰ *DBWE* 8:84; *DBW* 8:75–76.

⁴¹ *DBWE* 8:84–86; *DBW* 8:76–78.

⁴² *DBWE* 8:86–87; *DBW* 8:78–79.

⁴³ *DBWE* 8:87; *DBW* 8:79–80.

⁴⁴ See Bonhoeffer’s first (student) sermon on Ps 127:1 in *DBWE* 9:470–75; *DBW* 9:510–16, dated May 20, 1926.

God that they in turn ought to lead them.”⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer uses this psalm verse not in a prayerful, or even a Christological, manner, but more from a didactic and theological perspective. His goal is to situate marriage—and particularly, the gift of children given to a married couple—within a theological framework that views children as both gift and responsibility, as both a demonstration of the Gospel and an obligation of the Law. The gift of children in marriage inspires thanksgiving and praise in the parents’ hearts, even as the burdens of childbirth and child rearing lead parents “to call upon God and . . . remind them of their eternal destiny in God’s kingdom.”⁴⁶

The other sermon Bonhoeffer wrote from prison was a baptismal sermon for his nephew—the son of Eberhard and Renate Bethge—Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge.⁴⁷ In this sermon, dated May 1944, Bonhoeffer cites Ps 30:5 and Ps 144:1 as two texts among a host of others. His first Psalms text citation comes from Ps 144:1. In this section of the sermon he is speaking directly to his nephew in very personal terms about the world in which this child will live. The world in which this child will grow up, Bonhoeffer suggests, is not like the world of earlier generations where “pain was a stranger.”⁴⁸ Rather, he warns, in this new world, “[y]our generation will begin early having to bear privations and pain and having your patience severely tested.”⁴⁹ He continues:

[You] will learn from childhood on that this world is ruled by forces against which reason can do nothing. In our lives the “enemy” did not really exist. You know that you have enemies and friends, and what each means, enemy and friend, for your life. From childhood you will learn to fight your enemy in ways we never knew and to trust your friend unconditionally. “Do not human beings have a hard service on

⁴⁵ *DBWE* 8:86; *DBW* 8:78.

⁴⁶ *DBWE* 8:87; *DBW* 8:79.

⁴⁷ *DBWE* 8:382–90; *DBW* 8:428–36.

⁴⁸ *DBWE* 8:388; *DBW* 8:433.

⁴⁹ *DBWE* 8:388; *DBW* 8:433.

earth?” (Job 7:1). “Blessed be the LORD, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle; my rock and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge” (Ps. 144:1-2). “A true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin” (Prov. 18:24).⁵⁰

In this instance, Bonhoeffer is at once lamenting the arrival of a world in which reason and justice have failed,⁵¹ while also preparing his young nephew for an experience similar to what the psalmist David experienced—a threatening world in which dependence on God for daily provision, protection, and salvation was the only hope. Here, in this homiletical move, Bonhoeffer is not pointing to Jesus and his historical-existential experience reflected in the psalm, but to David and to the experiences from his life which gave birth to this psalm-prayer.⁵²

In the following paragraph of this sermon, Bonhoeffer cites Ps 30:5 as the conclusion to a string of OT prooftexts:

We can give up our privileges without a struggle, recognizing the justice of history. Events and circumstances may arise that take precedence over our wishes and our rights. Then, not in embittered and barren pride, but consciously yielding to divine judgment, we shall prove ourselves worthy to survive by identifying ourselves generously and selflessly with the whole community and the suffering of our fellow human beings. “But any nation that will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will leave on its own land, says the LORD, to till it and live there” (Jer. 27:11). “Seek the welfare of the city ... and pray to the LORD on its behalf” (Jer. 29:7). “Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the wrath is past” (Isa. 26:20). “For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5).⁵³

In this last section of his sermon, Bonhoeffer appears to make use of this text from Ps 30:5 to suggest that the traumatic events effecting the world at his time are not “uncaused” but are expressions of the judgment of God upon a people who have forgotten him and walked away

⁵⁰ *DBWE* 8:388; *DBW* 8:434.

⁵¹ *DBWE* 8:388; *DBW* 8:433.

⁵² This move is out of sort with what did in his earlier exegetical work in the Psalms. Sermons on texts such as Ps 42 and Ps 58, along with his *Prayerbook* show little concern for the psalms’ original historical context. See the conclusion of this chapter, as well as the final chapter of this dissertation, for more discussion on this point.

⁵³ *DBWE* 8:389; *DBW* 8:434–35

from him. Like the Israelites, who in biblical history experienced the loss of their homeland because of their idolatry and disobedience, Bonhoeffer saw the church of his day living in an equally foreign and godless land. As much as he sought to raise awareness of this reality, and prompt in his audience a desire to change their setting for the better, he also seemed to want to call the church to faithfulness in the midst of it. This faithfulness was to demonstrate itself in patient suffering, repentance, trust, and prayer. Above all, he sought to embolden the church to persevere through to the gracious and joy-filled morning of the LORD, coming upon his return (Ps 30:5).⁵⁴

In addition to these two sermons, Bonhoeffer also suggested a few different psalms texts for Bethge to consider if he were asked to preach in the near future. In a letter to Bethge dated July 1944, Bonhoeffer writes, “If you should be approached about preaching in the foreseeable future, I should take first such texts as Pss 62:2; 119:94; 42:6; Jer 31:3; Is 41:10; 43:1; and Mt 28:20b and confine myself to a few fundamental and simple thoughts.”⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer’s encouragement for preaching-texts include psalm verses which would have a meaningful message for that particular time of political and ecclesiological distress. Ps 62:2 [HB 3] says, “Surely he is my rock and my salvation; my fortress; I will not be greatly shaken.” Ps 119:94, taken from a psalm which Bonhoeffer was fond of quoting, reads, “I am yours; save me! For I have sought your precepts.” And, Ps 42:6 [HB 7] reads, “O my God, my soul is melted away within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan; and [from] the peaks of Herman, from Mount Mizar.” This last citation came from a psalm on which Bonhoeffer preached in

⁵⁴ As Bonhoeffer was contemplating the writing of this baptismal sermon for his nephew, he shared with Bethge that he was also considering other texts for the message (*DBWE* 8:381; *DBW* 8:425, dated May 16, 1944): “I’m still going to write something for the baptism. How about Ps. 90:14 as the text? I was also thinking of Isa. 8:18 but found it a bit too general.” Ps 90:14 says, “Satisfy us in the morning with your covenant faithfulness; and let us sing for joy and rejoice in our all days.”

⁵⁵ *DBWE* 8:475; *DBW* 8:529.

Zingst on June 2, 1935, just weeks into his position as director of the Confessing Church's Preacher's Seminary.⁵⁶ In this earlier setting, Bonhoeffer took on the whole psalm, verse-by-verse. But here, in this imprisonment letter to Bethge, he only suggests using Ps 42:6 [HB 7]. Bonhoeffer said the following about this verse in his 1935 sermon:

Why this relapse [referencing the psalmist's use of a similar phrase in Ps 42:5 [HB 6]? Must consolation always be followed by sadness? Such is the human heart that cannot be consoled, a heart plunging from one sorrow to another and finding support only by clinging to God. Far from the temple in Jerusalem, far from the church and from the community of believers, this heart's yearning remains disconsolate and awake. Its thoughts drift to its spiritual home in which it will find peace and joy and in which it can return home to God. When will I see this home again? Father, when you send me into a foreign land, help me keep this salutary yearning for my spiritual home, and direct my thoughts toward the eternal home in which you will comfort us all. Amen.⁵⁷

These comments from 1935 provide a helpful backdrop to Bonhoeffer's suggestion of this psalm verse to Bethge nearly ten years later. For, at that latter time, there was even greater sorrow and sadness, and even greater awareness of one's need to cling to God and "find peace and joy" in him alone. This verse seemed to fit the need that Bonhoeffer's anticipated Bethge would encounter in the churches.

When viewed from a broader perspective, Bonhoeffer's use of the Psalms within his imprisonment sermons carries with it a foreboding tone, despite the relatively joyful occasions for which he had prepared both messages. Considering this, it could be said that here, more than in his earlier exegetical writings, Bonhoeffer shows closer attention to the psalmist's original historical context than to the context established by Jesus's incarnational praying of them. In fact, Bonhoeffer makes no mention of Jesus or of Jesus's praying these psalms in any of his homiletical uses. His emphasis instead seems to be on the way that these psalm texts bring hope

⁵⁶ *DBWE* 14:845–54; *DBW* 14:851–60.

⁵⁷ *DBWE* 14:850; *DBW* 14:856.

and encouragement in God through their analogous expressions of real human need in the face of trial and persecution. Through this approach, Bonhoeffer is able to move beyond a mere cognitive treatment of the Psalms toward the goal of allowing them to help him make sense of his own situation.

Bonhoeffer’s Use of the Psalms in His Doctrinal Writings

Table 5.5. Bonhoeffer’s Use of the Psalms in His Doctrinal Writings

REFERENCE	DATE OF USAGE	GENRE OF SOURCE	DBWE [DBW] CITATION
Ps 75:1 [HB 2]	June-July 1944	Doctrinal	16:640 [667]
Ps 119:32	June-July 1944	Doctrinal	16:637 [663]
Ps 119:92	June-July 1944	Doctrinal	16:636 [662–63]
Ps 127:1–2	June-July 1944	Doctrinal	16:643 [670]
Ps 147:20	June-July 1944	Doctrinal	16:636 [662]

In the early summer months of 1944, Bonhoeffer gave his attention to a study of the first three Commandments in a document which he titled an “Exposition on the First Table of the Ten Words of God.”⁵⁸ In this doctrinal treatment Bonhoeffer cites five different psalms texts. In explicating the unique relationship God established with his church-community, Bonhoeffer quotes both Ps 147:20a (“He [God] has not done thus for all nations”) and Ps 119:92 (“If your torah had not been my delight I would have perished in my affliction”). He then explicates the significance of the phrase “Your God” in Ex 20:2 in light of these two psalm verses: “God is

⁵⁸ *DBWE* 16:633–44; *DBW* 16:658–72. Bonhoeffer’s explains the title of this work (*DBWE* 16:634–35; *DBW* 16:660): “Perhaps we would do better to speak, with the Bible, of ‘the ten words’ of God (Deut. 4:13) instead of the ‘Ten Commandments.’ Then we would not so easily confuse them with human laws; then we would not so easily push aside the first words, ‘I am the LORD, your God’ as a mere preamble with no apparent relation or correspondence to the commandments at all. But in reality precisely these first words are the most important of all. . . .” This is not Bonhoeffer’s only interaction with the Decalogue. He presented them in children’s sermons (*DBWE* 9:456–61; *DBW* 9:491–97; and *DBWE* 9:461–64; *DBW* 9:498–502), argued for their ongoing legitimacy in the Bethel Confession (*DBWE* 12:374–424; *DBW* 12:362–407), applied them in lectures on pastoral care (*DBWE* 14:559–75; *DBW* 14:554–71) and confirmation instruction (*DBWE* 14:782– 814; *DBW* 14:786–819) from Finkenwalde, and explored their meaning in *Discipleship* (particularly chapter 6, *DBWE* 4: 131–37; *DBW* 4:134–40) and *Ethics* (*DBWE/DBW* 6).

speaking to his chosen people, to the church-community who hears him in faith. For them the Lord, the inaccessibly distant and powerful one, is simultaneously the close, present, and merciful one.”⁵⁹ This association of God’s unique and self-initiated presence among us by means of the word of God is an echo of what he wrote in *Prayerbook* and in his unfinished commentary on Ps 119. God’s commandments are not just received as law—that is, rules which tell us what must or must not be done in order to avoid punishment or to receive blessing from God—but as Gospel, as life-giving instruction which initiates and sustains our faithful and obedient “walk” with God. He quotes Ps 119:32 (“I will run in the way of your commandments, for you give freedom to my heart”) and adds, “Those who would speak of the Ten Commandments must seek them in [the context of God’s gracious presence], and so they must speak of the grace of God at the same time. Those who would proclaim the Ten Commandments must at the same time proclaim God’s free grace.”⁶⁰

Bonhoeffer’s fourth doctrinal psalm citation is of Ps 75:1 [HB2] and is found in his comments on the second commandment.⁶¹ Bonhoeffer held that God’s name was a means through which God revealed himself to us. Therefore, “God” is not just a “general concept ... but instead ‘God’ is a name.... ‘God’ is a name, and this name is the greatest treasure we possess; for in it we have not something we have thought up on our own but God’s entire being itself, in God’s revelation.”⁶² He continues, “When we say God, we at the same time already hear God speaking to us, calling and comforting us, commanding us; we perceive God acting in us, creating, judging, renewing.” This activity of God toward the believer begins from outside of us,

⁵⁹ *DBWE* 16:636; *DBW* 16:662.

⁶⁰ *DBWE* 16:637; *DBW* 16:663.

⁶¹ *DBWE* 16:640–42; *DBW* 16:666–69.

⁶² *DBWE* 16:640; *DBW* 16:666–67.

but then makes its way inside. It is not just external but also internal, not solely distant but also near. For this reason, Bonhoeffer adds, ““We give thanks to you, O God; ... your name is near’ (Ps. 75:1).”⁶³

Bonhoeffer’s final citation of a psalm text in his imprisonment doctrinal writings is found in his comments on the third commandment.⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer laments the fact that “[t]he day of rest [Feiertag] seems to us to be a lovely and pleasant concession, but the idea that the gravity of a commandment of God backs it up has now become alien to us.”⁶⁵ Reminiscent of his use of the first verse (only) of Ps 127 in his earliest sermon on the Psalms from May 20, 1926,⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer now quotes from Ps 127:1–2, “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain ... for [the Lord] provides for his beloved during sleep.”⁶⁷ He adds, this is what the Bible “says ... against all who make their work into their religion. A day of resting [Feiertagsruhe] is the visible sign that a person lives from the grace of God and not from works.”⁶⁸ A different genre of writing, and a much different political, social, and ecclesiological context at the time of this writing, enable Bonhoeffer to apply these verses in slightly different ways. However, the underlying sentiment is still the same in both his earlier sermon and this doctrinal writing: “God knows that the work people do takes on such power over them that they cannot let it go, that they expect everything from their work and forget God in the process.”⁶⁹ This concern for the potential to “forget God” was also on Bonhoeffer’s mind in 1926, although his answer for overcoming this temptation was

⁶³ *DBWE* 16:640; *DBW* 16:667.

⁶⁴ *DBWE* 16:642–44; *DBW* 16:670–72.

⁶⁵ *DBWE* 16:642; *DBW* 16:670.

⁶⁶ *DBWE* 9:470–75; *DBW* 9:510–16.

⁶⁷ *DBWE* 16:643; *DBW* 16:670.

⁶⁸ *DBWE* 16:643; *DBW* 16:670.

⁶⁹ *DBWE* 16:643; *DBW* 16:670.

not nearly as fine-tuned then as it is now eighteen years later. In this latter usage, Bonhoeffer explains his understanding by citing Luther:

The Sabbath is hallowed not by means of what human beings do or do not do, but by means of the action of Jesus Christ for human salvation. For this reason the ancient Christians replaced the Sabbath with the day of Jesus Christ's resurrection and called this the day of the Lord. That explains why Luther rightly renders the Third Commandment not with a literal translation of the Hebrew word Sabbath, but with the spiritually interpreted word "day of rest" [Feiertag]. Our Sunday is the day on which we allow Jesus Christ to act toward us and all people. To be sure, this ought to occur every day; but on Sunday we rest from our work so that it might take place in a special way.⁷⁰

This turn toward Jesus Christ is not at all present in Bonhoeffer's 1926 interpretation of Ps 127:1.

Bonhoeffer's Use of the Psalms During His Imprisonment: by Category/Theme

In *Prayerbook*, Bonhoeffer organized his comments on the Psalms according to the following themes: creation, law, the history of salvation, the Messiah, the church, life, suffering, guilt, enemies, the end.⁷¹ Table 5.6 lists Bonhoeffer's imprisonment use of the Psalms according to these *Prayerbook* categories.⁷² Bonhoeffer does not identify the theme of every single psalm within *Prayerbook*, but he does suggest the psalms which serve as primary examples under each given theme. The list provided in Table 5.6 identifies some psalms in more than one category. This is because Bonhoeffer himself included them under more than one category in *Prayerbook*. I have listed in this table only those psalms which Bonhoeffer referenced during his imprisonment. Therefore, the number of unique occurrences of psalm verses appearing here is reduced by about half the number listed in Table 5.1.

⁷⁰ *DBWE* 16:644; *DBW* 16:671–72.

⁷¹ *DBWE* 5:162; *DBW* 5:117.

⁷² All references appearing in italics are found in the editors' contributions to *DBWE/DBW* 8 and *DBWE/DBW* 16.

Table 5.6. Bonhoeffer's Use of the Psalms During His Imprisonment: by *Prayerbook* Categorization⁷³

REFERENCE	GENRE OF SOURCE	PRAYERBOOK CATEGORY	DBWE [DBW] CITATION
Ps 119:32	Doctrinal	The Law	16:637 [663]
Ps 119:92	Doctrinal	The Law	16:636 [662–63]
Ps 119:94	Personal letter	The Law	8:475 [529]
<i>Ps 20:7 [HB 8]</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>The Messiah</i>	8:485
<i>Ps 22:12 [13]</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>The Messiah</i>	8:269
<i>Ps 27:4</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>The Church</i>	8:231
Ps 42:6 [HB7]	Personal letter	The Church	8:475 [529]
Ps 50:15	Personal letter	The Church	8:276 [300–01]
Ps 37:3	Personal letter	Life	8:415 [466]
Ps 13:1 [HB 2]	Personal letter	Suffering	8:80 [71]
<i>Ps 23:1</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>Suffering</i>	8:485
Ps 31:15 [HB 16]	Notes	Suffering	8:72 [62]
	Notes	Suffering	8:73 [63]
	Personal letter	Suffering	8:80 [70]
	Poem-Prayers	Suffering	8:196 [206]
	<i>Editor's Afterword</i>	<i>Suffering</i>	8:582 [644]
Ps 37:3	Personal letter	Suffering	8:415 [466]
Ps 54:4 [HB 6]	Devotional	Suffering	16:629 [654]
Ps 121:6	Personal letter	Suffering	8:448 [501]
Ps 9:19–20 [HB 20–21]	Personal letter	Guilt	8:361 [402]
Ps 18:29 [HB 30]	Personal letter	Guilt	8:235 [252]
<i>Ps 18:30 [HB 31]</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>Guilt</i>	8:236
<i>Ps 25:17</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>Guilt</i>	8:269
Ps 31:15 [HB 16]	Notes	Guilt	8:72 [62]
	Notes	Guilt	8:73 [63]
	Personal letter	Guilt	8:80 [70]
	Poem-Prayers	Guilt	8:196 [206]
	<i>Editor's Afterword</i>	<i>Guilt</i>	8:582 [644]
<i>Ps 32:7</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>Guilt</i>	8:269
<i>Ps 68:19 [HB 20]</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>Guilt</i>	8:66
<i>Ps 68:20 [HB 21]</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>Guilt</i>	8:66
Ps 91:11	Personal letter	Guilt	8:417 [467]

⁷³ Bonhoeffer's categorization of psalms in *Prayerbook* is based on theme or subject matter (*DBWE* 5:162; *DBW* 5:117). He does not categorize every psalm, but lists under each heading primary examples of that particular topic. Consequently, in this table, I have only listed those psalms which Bonhoeffer used during his imprisonment and which he also explicitly cited in *Prayerbook*. This reduces the number of uses of the Psalms by about half.

	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>Guilt</i>	8:549
	Devotional	Guilt	16:631 [656]
Ps 9:19–20 [HB 20–21]	Personal letter	Enemies	8:361 [402]
Ps 13:1 [HB 2]	Personal letter	Enemies	8:80 [71]
<i>Ps 23:1</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>Enemies</i>	8:485
Ps 31:15 [HB 16]	Notes	Enemies	8:72 [62]
	Notes	Enemies	8:73 [63]
	Personal letter	Enemies	8:80 [70]
	Poem-Prayers	Enemies	8:196 [206]
	<i>Editor's Afterword</i>	<i>Enemies</i>	8:582 [644]
Ps 58:11 [HB 12]	Personal letter	Enemies	8:361 [402]
Ps 70	Personal letter	Enemies	8:81 [72]
	Personal letter	Enemies	8:187 [195]
Ps 34:19 [HB 20]	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>The End</i>	8:409
	Devotional	The End	16:631 [657]
<i>Ps 34:20 [HB 21]</i>	<i>Editor's footnote</i>	<i>The End</i>	8:493
Ps 90:14	Personal letter	The End	8:381 [425]

By far, the largest grouping of Bonhoeffer's Psalms' usage from the period of his imprisonment comes from the themes of suffering, guilt, and enemies. This fact aligns with what would be presumed of Bonhoeffer's reflections of his imprisonment experiences. Out of this grouping, there are fifteen unique occurrences which come from psalms identified as *guilt* psalms. This is the largest number of occurrences in any given theme from Bonhoeffer's list. In *Prayerbook*, Bonhoeffer said that the "guilt" psalms "lead us into the very depth of the recognition of sin before God. They help us in the confession of guilt. They turn our entire trust to the forgiving grace of God."⁷⁴ These psalms, he argued, do not end with an uncertain request for forgiveness but, rather, point us to the sure promise of forgiveness in Christ: "In every case all hope is fixed on free forgiveness, as God has offered and promised it to us for all time in God's word about Jesus Christ."⁷⁵ This emphasis on the believer's initial concern for his own sin

⁷⁴ *DBWE* 5:171; *DBW* 5:126.

⁷⁵ *DBWE* 5:171–72; *DBW* 5:126.

before judging the sin of others echoes Bonhoeffer's usual progression, as seen in his sermon on Ps 58 and his unfinished commentary on Ps 119.⁷⁶

The eleven occurrences of psalms from the *enemies* theme seem like a natural choice given the constant threat Bonhoeffer (and others close to him) felt from their Nazi oppressors. With these uses Bonhoeffer raises again the piercing question he asked in *Prayerbook*: "Can the imprecatory psalms be understood as the Word of God for us and as the prayer of Jesus Christ? Can we pray these psalms as Christians?"⁷⁷ The answer he provided is that, "with my sin I myself belong under this judgment [from God against sin]. I have no right to want to hinder this judgment. It must be fulfilled for God's sake. And it has certainly been fulfilled in a wonderful way. God's vengeance did not fall on the sinners, but on the only sinless one, the Son of God, who stood in the place of sinners."⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer encountered daily reminders of the work of his oppressors against him, and thus he turned often to these psalms as he sought to make sense of and respond in faith to his persecutions.

As Table 5.6 shows, the third highest group reflected in Bonhoeffer's imprisonment use of the Psalms is *suffering*. Ten times he references these psalms, demonstrating his conviction that "The Psalter has rich instruction for us about how to come before God in a proper way in the various sufferings that the world brings upon us.... [These psalms] do not deny [suffering], they do not deceive themselves with pious words about it, they allow it to stand as a severe ordeal of faith, indeed at times they no longer see beyond the suffering (Ps 88), but they complain about it all to God."⁷⁹ As has been already addressed, Bonhoeffer's biographers note his deep reflections

⁷⁶ See "Sermon on Psalm 58," *DBWE* 14: 964; *DBW* 14:981; as well as Bonhoeffer's comments on Ps 119:7, *DBWE* 15:508–11; *DBW* 15:513–16.

⁷⁷ *DBWE* 5:174; *DBW* 5:129.

⁷⁸ *DBWE* 5:175; *DBW* 5:129.

⁷⁹ *DBWE* 5:169; *DBW* 5:124.

on suffering during this time and the way he endured his own such experiences with the aid of daily prayer and meditation on the Psalms. As this list shows, a significant part of the instruction and encouragement given him by the Psalms came through texts which addressed the topic of suffering in the life of believers.

Bonhoeffer made use of psalms which came from eight of the ten themes he designated in *Prayerbook*. The two these that are absent in his imprisonment use of the psalms are the themes of *creation* and the *history of salvation*.

Bonhoeffer's Use of the Psalms During His Imprisonment: by Date

Table 5.7 shows Bonhoeffer's use of the Psalms during his imprisonment according to the date he made of them. Those uses appearing in Table 5.1 which are not clearly identified with a specific date are left out of this table.

Table 5.7. Bonhoeffer's Use of the Psalms During His Imprisonment: by Date

REFERENCE	DATE OF USAGE	GENRE OF SOURCE	DBWE [DBW] CITATION
Ps 70	Apr 23, 1943	Personal Letter	8:60 [49]
Psalms	Apr 25, 1943	Personal Letter	8:63 [52]
Ps 31:15 [HB 16]	May 1943	Notes	8:72 [62]
	May 1943	Notes	8:73 [63]
<i>Ps 68:19 [HB 20]</i>	<i>May 4, 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:66</i>
<i>Ps 68:20 [HB 21]</i>	<i>May 4, 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:66</i>
Psalms	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
Ps 3	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
Ps 13:1 [HB 2]	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:80 [71]
Ps 31:15 [HB 16]	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:80 [70]
<i>Ps 31:15 [HB 16]</i>	<i>May 15, 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Afterword</i>	<i>8:582 [644]</i>
Ps 47	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
Ps 70	May 15, 1943	Personal Letter	8:81 [72]
Ps 127:3	May 15, 1943	Homily	8:86 [78]
Ps 60:2 [HB 4]	Sept 5, 1943	Personal Letter	8:150 [152]
Ps 31:15 [HB 16]	Nov 1943	Prayers	8:196 [206]
Psalms	Nov 18, 1943	Personal Letter	8:180 [187]
Psalms	Nov 20, 1943	Personal Letter	8:187 [196]

Ps 47	Nov 20, 1943	Personal Letter	8:187 [195]
Ps 70	Nov 20, 1943	Personal Letter	8:187 [195]
<i>Ps 95:7-8</i>	<i>Nov 27, 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:201</i>
<i>Ps 27:4</i>	<i>Dec 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:231</i>
Ps 18:29 [HB 30]	Dec 22, 1943	Personal Letter	8:235 [252]
<i>Ps 18:30 [HB 31]</i>	<i>Dec 22, 1943</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:236</i>
Ps 60:12 [HB 13]	Dec 22, 1943	Personal Letter	8:236 [253]
Psalms	Jan 23, 1944	Personal Letter	8:269 [292]
<i>Ps 22:12 [13]</i>	<i>Jan 23, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:269</i>
<i>Ps 25:17</i>	<i>Jan 23, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:269</i>
<i>Ps 32:7</i>	<i>Jan 23, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:269</i>
Ps 50:15	Jan 29–30, 1944	Personal Letter	8:276 [300–01]
Ps 9:19–20 [HB 20–21]	Apr 30, 1944	Personal Letter	8:361 [402]
Ps 58:11 [HB 12]	Apr 30, 1944	Personal Letter	8:361 [402]
Ps 30:5 [HB 6]	May 1944	Homily	8:389 [435]
Ps 144:1	May 1944	Homily	8:388 [434]
Ps 90:14	May 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:381 [425]
Ps 94:12–13	May 28–30, 1944	Devotional	16:627 [652]
Ps 75:1 [HB 2]	June–July 1944	Doctrinal	16:640 [667]
Ps 119:32	June–July 1944	Doctrinal	16:637 [663]
Ps 119:92	June–July 1944	Doctrinal	16:636 [662–63]
Ps 127:1–2	June–July 1944	Doctrinal	16:643 [670]
Ps 147:20	June–July 1944	Doctrinal	16:636 [662]
<i>Ps 34:19 [HB 20]</i>	<i>June 2, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:409</i>
Ps 37:3	June 5, 1944	Personal Letter	8:415 [466]
Ps 91:11	June 5, 1944	Personal Letter	8:417 [467]
Ps 34:19 [HB 20]	June 7–8, 1944	Devotional	16:631 [657]
Ps 54:4	June 7–8, 1944	Devotional	16:629 [654]
Ps 91:11	June 7–8, 1944	Devotional	16:631 [656]
Ps 121:6	June 27, 1944	Personal Letter	8:448 [501]
Ps 42:6 [HB7]	July 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:475 [529]
Ps 62:2 [HB 3]	July 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:475 [529]
Ps 119:94	July 16, 1944	Personal Letter	8:475 [529]
<i>Ps 20:7 [HB 8]</i>	<i>July 21, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:485</i>
<i>Ps 23:1</i>	<i>July 21, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:485</i>
<i>Ps 34:20 [HB 21]</i>	<i>July 28, 1944</i>	<i>Editor: Footnote</i>	<i>8:493</i>

This table shows a consistent use of the Psalms between the time of Bonhoeffer's arrest (Apr 5, 1943) and mid-summer of 1944. The three time periods of greatest use are Apr–May 1943, Nov 1943–Jan 1944, and May–July 1944. These three periods involve, respectively, Bonhoeffer's initial arrest and imprisonment, a noted period of anxiousness about his potential

release by Christmas 1943, and a time of intense doctrinal and devotional writing.

Three Imprisonment Uses of the Psalms by Bonhoeffer in Close-View

Out of all the uses Bonhoeffer made of the Psalms during his imprisonment, three uses stand out for the way they provide a more thorough sense of context and interpretive clarity. These uses include a personal letter in which Bonhoeffer cites both Ps 58:11 [HB 12] and Ps 9:19–20 [HB20–21], devotional reflections on Ps 54:4 [HB 6]; 91:11; 34:19 [HB 20], and another personal letter in which Bonhoeffer cites Ps 13:1 and Ps 31:15 [HB 16].

A Personal Letter Citing Ps 58:11 [HB 12] and Ps 9:19–20 [HB 20–21]

Nearly thirteen months into his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to Eberhard Bethge in which he expressed a sense of longing and expectation for a change in the current world events.⁸⁰ This desire undoubtedly had to do both with his anticipation that the war may be nearing a turning point⁸¹ and with his eager hope that the resistance movement would soon succeed in their attempts to overthrow Hitler. Bonhoeffer described himself in this letter as sharing the prophets' curious yearning for insight into how God was going to bring about his perfect will (1 Pet 1:12). He then stated his confidence in the plain truth of Ps 58:11 [HB 12] and Ps 9:19–20 [HB 20–21], after which he added: “and we shall have to repeat Jer. 45:5 to ourselves every day.”⁸²

Bonhoeffer's reference to Ps 58:11 [HB 12] harkens back to his controversial sermon on

⁸⁰ *DBWE* 8:361–67; *DBW* 8:401–8. This letter is dated April 30, 1944.

⁸¹ *DBWE* 8:361n 2: “In the south the Allies had begun to advance on Rome and would take the city on June 4, 1944. In mid-April the eastern front lay along the Odessa-Brest-Litovsk line, so that the Red Army's invasion of Poland was foreseeable.”

⁸² *DBWE* 8:361; *DBW* 8:402.

that same psalm on July 11, 1937 in Finkenwalde.⁸³ In that sermon, Bonhoeffer commented on v. 11 [HB 12] in this way:

People will say: “There is a reward for the righteous.” It is not the happiness, power, or glory of this world that is the reward of the righteous, but the community of the cross of Jesus Christ, redemption from God’s wrath. “God is still the judge on earth.” Where is God’s judgment on the wicked on earth? Not in visible misfortune, failure, or even in disgrace before this world, but solely in the cross of Jesus Christ. Is that not enough for us? Do we not already see in this cross the defeat and judgment of all of God’s enemies? Why are we still so uneasy, why do we insist on seeing more than this judgment of God? Hence whenever we go astray regarding God’s righteousness on earth, let us look to the cross of Christ: for there is judgment, there reprieve.⁸⁴

When Bonhoeffer wrote to Bethge of his confidence that Ps 58:11 [HB 12] and Ps 9:19-20 [HB 20–21] are true, what he was communicating was, first, his belief that the righteous have not been neglected. They have received a reward from God—that reward being “the community of the cross of Jesus Christ, redemption from God’s wrath.”⁸⁵ The righteous may be tempted to believe that their reward is still forthcoming, or that it must include nothing less than the defeat of their present-day enemy, the Nazi Reich. But as Bonhoeffer states in his original sermon, this is not to be the church-community’s goal, for “[i]t is not the happiness, power, or glory of this world”⁸⁶ that is the believer’s hope. This reality, Bonhoeffer argues, prevents the righteous from “praying against” their enemy in any way that seeks or delights in their destruction as an additional reward over and above what God has already given the righteous in the forgiveness of sins and adoption into the community of the church of Jesus Christ. The significance of this “plain truth” for Bonhoeffer was far-reaching. For, as difficult as it might seem, it meant that whatever he *was* to pray with regard to Hitler or his agents, it was *not* to include a desire for their “visible misfortune, failure, or even in disgrace before this world.”

⁸³ *DBWE* 14:963–70; *DBW* 14:980–88.

⁸⁴ *DBWE* 14:970; *DBW* 14:988.

⁸⁵ *DBWE* 14:970; *DBW* 14:988.

⁸⁶ *DBWE* 14:970; *DBW* 14:988.

Secondly, this psalm verse acknowledges that God is not indifferent about injustice and sin, for “God is still the judge on earth”⁸⁷ (Ps 58:11b [HB 12b]). God has, in fact, already dealt a final death-blow to sin and wickedness—at the cross. In his Finkenwalde sermon Bonhoeffer exclaimed, “Do we not already see in this cross the defeat and judgment of all of God’s enemies?”⁸⁸ His reference to Ps 58:11 [HB 12] from prison served as an affirmation of his continued belief that there is, indeed, judgment for the wicked just as there is also true reward for the righteous. The righteous do not determine the nature of this judgment or reward any more than they can orchestrate their own redemption. Therefore, central to this present use of Ps 58:11 [HB 12] is its encouragement for believers to submit their desires for vengeance upon their enemies to God, trusting him to work out his will according to his perfect wisdom. In the same way that the cross of Christ produces amazement in the manner in which it simultaneously delivers God’s full justice and full mercy, so, Bonhoeffer suggests, those suffering unyielding oppression are to anticipate God’s perfect work as something that “can only [be] take[n] in with the greatest astonishment and awe.”⁸⁹

Bonhoeffer’s reference to Ps 9:19–20 [HB 20–21] in the same sentence of this prison letter reveals his recognition of a similar emphasis in these verses. Here, the psalmist issues a call for God to rise up and judge the nations. As stated in his Ps 58 sermon, Bonhoeffer believed that God *has* judged the world against his righteous standard at the cross. Here, all people have been found guilty. God is proven just in that he declares the appropriate penalty of death against humanity. Yet he is proven loving and merciful in that he offers his one and only Son as

⁸⁷ *DBWE* 14:970; *DBW* 14:988.

⁸⁸ *DBWE* 14:970; *DBW* 14:988. See also *DBWE* 8:361n 5: John W. de Gruchy comments in this footnote that in “Bonhoeffer’s Luther Bible, ‘God who judges on earth’ is underlined in pencil and written in pencil next to it ‘the crucified one!’” In Bonhoeffer’s view, the ultimate judgment of God’s enemies has already taken place at the cross. The One who has taken upon himself the penalty of this judgment is Jesus Christ.

⁸⁹ *DBWE* 8:361; *DBW* 8:401.

humanity's atoning, substitutionary sacrifice for sin. It is in this understanding that Bonhoeffer cites these verses from Ps 9. It is also what allows him to conclude his Finkenwalde sermon on Ps 58 with these words:

And now we pray along with this psalm [Ps 58], in humble gratitude for the cross of Christ having saved us from wrath, with the ardent petition that God bring all our enemies to the cross of Christ and grant them mercy, with fierce yearning that the day might soon come when Christ visibly triumphs over all his enemies and establishes his kingdom. Thus have we learned to pray this psalm. Amen.⁹⁰

Bonhoeffer's "movement" in the Ps 58 sermon—from the original text, to the present-day situation, to the event of the cross on Good Friday, back to the present-day—is not fully supported or, at times, clear. Yet he continues to show a consistent theological understanding of this type of psalm. This understanding states that the oppression and persecution of believers is an on-going reality and challenge for the church-community in this sinful world and that the church-community's response should not be to take up arms and pursue temporal vengeance against its enemies but to submit themselves to God and his will for them, praying "with fierce yearning" for the conversion of their enemies and for God's kingdom to come.

Devotional Reflections on Ps 54:4 [HB 6]; 91:11; 34:19 [HB 20]

Bonhoeffer's devotional use of Ps 54:4 [HB 6]; 91:11; 34:19 [HB 20] provides a second example of his more transparent use of the Psalms from prison. The writing of these types of devotional reflections was a regular part of Bonhoeffer's ministry to his friends and Confessing Church colleagues ever since the closing of the Preacher's Seminary at Finkenwalde. These particular reflections were based on the *Losungen* texts from June 7–8, 1944.⁹¹

Bonhoeffer focuses his thoughts in this devotional on the meaning of the word *helper*

⁹⁰ *DBWE* 14:970; *DBW* 14:988.

⁹¹ *DBWE* 16:629–33; *DBW* 16:654–58.

(Beistand) in Ps 54:4 [HB 6], “Behold! God is my helper; the Lord is the sustainer of my soul.” He points to the first appearance of this word in Gn 2:18 and, from there, ties it to Jesus’s description in Jn 14:16 of the role of the Holy Spirit. Bonhoeffer then relates this to the help given and received between a husband and wife. This is divine work, Bonhoeffer argues, and work which is ultimately completed by God through his Holy Spirit.⁹² He does not neglect, however, our human desire to be of help to one another, particularly in times of need:

Nothing is more painful for us than to be forced to leave the other person to face dangers[, duties], decisions, difficult situations alone, to be [un]able to help the other [with them]; this is what makes every separation [in marriage] so difficult. In such situations the Psalm’s word applies to you: “surely,] the Lord is my helper.” This is how people speak to one another, how they comfort the other person and themselves. They point to all that God has done for them in the past; they point to the God who was faithful and remains faithful, who has never left them without help in dangers and difficulties and never will. Can we comfort one another in any better way, can we help one another any better than to say confidently and securely to one another: Don’t worry about me, I am taken care of! Don’t be afraid, I am not left alone! Look and see, God is helping me! Take heart, and then my heart is also consoled! Wherever I may be, God stands by me and helps me.⁹³

Bonhoeffer used this psalm to express his confidence in God’s help in time of need, both for himself and for others. He includes here a quotation of Ps 91:11, “For [God] has commanded his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways.” This verse was quoted by Jesus in Mt 4:6 as a response to Satan’s temptation. Both by this connection and by his reference to Jesus’s announcing of the Holy Spirit in Jn 14:16, Bonhoeffer situates Jesus as one who is involved with the rescue sought in Ps 54:4 [HB 6]. Jesus is both the one who has come to our aid and the one announcing the giving of the Holy Spirit, who is called our “helper” or Advocate.

Despite this reference to Jesus, it should be noted that Bonhoeffer does not take the

⁹² *DBWE* 16:630; *DBW* 16:655.

⁹³ *DBWE* 16:630; *DBW* 16:655. The footnote inserted at the start of this text (*DBWE* 16:629n 9) states that “Until the end of the war, this manuscript was buried, and the text is obliterated in places. Additions appear in square brackets.”

additional step in this devotional that he seemed willing to take at Finkenwalde in terms of the relationship of Jesus the crucified to this psalm. In his sermon on Ps 58, Bonhoeffer put the words of the psalm into the mouth of Jesus. Here, in his imprisonment use, Jesus is not presented as the speaker of this psalm but merely the one we call on by means of this psalm. In my estimation, Bonhoeffer’s earlier interpretive approach would have taken into consideration the reality of Jesus crying out to God in his incarnation⁹⁴ and shown how Jesus’s prayer was answered. This reality could then have been used to show that those who, out of their own trials, pray the words of this psalm—words which were also prayed by Jesus—can have the same assurance of an answer that Jesus had. Bonhoeffer’s conviction regarding the eternal intercession of Jesus for his church could have additionally been utilized to support his belief that Jesus was continuing to pray this prayer on behalf of his church. This interpretive move in the interpretation of Ps 54:4 [HB 6] would have more clearly situated Jesus Christ at the center of this prayer as its interpretive key. Yet this approach is absent from this devotional writing.

Bonhoeffer then goes on to add the following thoughts from Ps 34:19 [HB 20], which he connects to Ps 54:4 [HB 6] by means of the HB word **נצַל**.⁹⁵ Luther translates this word in his German text as *hilft*, which Bonhoeffer understood as meaning “to help.”⁹⁶ Bonhoeffer’s emphasis from this verse is on unjust suffering encountered by the righteous at the hands of the wicked. This suffering, Bonhoeffer argues, is uniquely felt by God: “they suffer just as God suffers at the hands of the world.... [I]n the suffering of the righteous God’s help is always

⁹⁴ Texts which support this reality include Mt 27:46; Le 22:39–44; Heb 5:7–10.

⁹⁵ This is a rare instance of Bonhoeffer’s use of HB in his writings on the Psalms, whether from the time of his imprisonment or before.

⁹⁶ The NASB translates **נצַל** as “deliver.” Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *NIDOTTE*, 3:141, s.v. “נ” suggests a range of meanings including “to rescue, save, plunder, snatch away, pull out, extricate.”

present, because the righteous suffer with God.”⁹⁷ Because the Lord promises to the righteous that he will deliver (help) them, “[t]he response of the righteous to the suffering that the world inflicts on them is: to bless. That was God’s response to the world that nailed Christ to the cross: blessing. God does not repay evil for evil, and thus the righteous should not do so either. No judgment, no abuse, but blessing. The world would have no hope if this were not the case.”⁹⁸

Although Bonhoeffer makes mention of Jesus and the cross in these comments, his emphasis is more on the example that is set by the way God responds to the world’s evil actions against Jesus than it is on the hope we draw from praying this prayer with Jesus. He also stops short again of making the connection that those who pray this psalm in union with Jesus can share the same hope and anticipation of God’s deliverance that Jesus experienced. What he does instead is to use this psalm verse as a way to inform his response to the persecution and injustice of the political powers toward him and toward the church-community. He takes courage from the way these verses express absolute trust in God, even in the face of life-threatening persecution.

A Personal Letter Citing Ps 13:1; Ps 31:15 [HB 16]

The final imprisonment use of the Psalms that I will give close attention to in this chapter comes from a personal letter from Bonhoeffer dated May 15, 1943, which he wrote to his father and mother, Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer.⁹⁹ In this letter Bonhoeffer speaks of his appreciation for family and describes the daily activities that occupy him in prison.¹⁰⁰ He does not complain but

⁹⁷ *DBWE* 16:632; *DBW* 16:657. For reasons that are unclear, Bonhoeffer leaves Jesus out of this particular statement. Without additional repetition of this way of speaking or of further explanation from him on this interpretation, we are unable to draw a conclusion on whether Bonhoeffer is here making some sort of doctrinal statement or just speaking in general terms about God’s awareness of our suffering and his presence with us in the midst of it.

⁹⁸ *DBWE* 16:632; *DBW* 16:657.

⁹⁹ *DBWE* 8:78–81; *DBW* 8:69–72.

¹⁰⁰ He plainly writes (*DBWE* 8:79; *DBW* 8:69–70), “For it is, of course difficult on the outside to imagine

instead shows signs of his early attempts to make sense of his prison experience both existentially and theologically.¹⁰¹ He writes:

I have never understood as clearly as I have here what the Bible and Luther mean by “temptation” [Anfechtung]. The peace and serenity by which one had been carried are suddenly shaken without any apparent physical or psychological reason, and the heart becomes, as Jeremiah very aptly put it, an obstinate and anxious thing that one is unable to fathom. One experiences this as an attack from the outside, as evil powers that seek to rob one of what is most essential. But even these experiences may be good and necessary in order to learn to understand human life better.¹⁰²

Bonhoeffer then describes an experience he had in the first days of his imprisonment, one which exposed him to the question that most haunts those in indefinite containment:

I am currently trying my hand at a small study on the “sense of time,” an experience likely characterizing pretrial detention. One of my predecessors scribbled above the cell door: “In one hundred years everything will be over,” as his attempt to cope with this experience of the empty time. But there is much to be said about this, and I would enjoy talking it over with Papa. “My times are in your hand,” Ps. 31[:15], is the biblical answer to this question. But the Bible also contains the question that threatens to dominate everything here: “Lord, how long?” Ps. 13[:1].¹⁰³

Christian Gremmels identifies these two verses—Ps 31:15 [HB 16] and Ps 13:1—as representative of the two poles between which Bonhoeffer’s life swung during the first six months of his imprisonment in Tegel.¹⁰⁴ His repeated reference to them during these months

realistically what being in prison is like. The situation as such, that is, the individual moment, is in fact often not so different from being someplace else. I read, reflect, work, write, pace the room—and I really do so without rubbing myself sore on the wall like a polar bear. What matters is being focused on what one still has and what can be one—and that is still a great deal—and on restraining within oneself the rising thoughts about what one cannot do and the inner restlessness and resentment about the entire situation.”

¹⁰¹ Evidence of this struggle can be seen in a May 5, 1943 letter Bonhoeffer wrote to his brother-in-law and fellow conspirator, Hans von Dohnanyi (*DBWE* 8:69; *DBW* 8:59): “Such things [as these trials and imprisonment] come from God and God alone.... [O]ur response to God can only be submission, endurance, patience—and gratitude. Thus every question of ‘why’ falls silent because it has found its answer.”

¹⁰² *DBWE* 8:79; *DBW* 8:70.

¹⁰³ *DBWE* 8:79–80; *DBW* 8:70–71. Bonhoeffer’s handwritten notes from May 1943 (*DBWE* 8:70–74; *DBW* 8:60–64), just weeks into his imprisonment, shows evidence of his rumination on this topic. Footnote 7 (*DBWE* 8:79; *DBW* 8:70) states that “this document has been lost.”

¹⁰⁴ She writes in the “Editor’s Afterword to the German Edition” of *Letters and Papers from Prison* (*DBWE* 8:565; *DBW* 8:623), “[f]or the prisoner in investigative custody, time became a period of waiting.”

(particularly to Ps 31:15 [HB 16]) shows how he continued to explore their contribution to framing his understanding of life and of time theologically.¹⁰⁵

What Ps 31:15 [HB 16] seems to have brought to an analysis of Bonhoeffer's experience was an understanding of God's perspective on time and human suffering. Tegel was full of prisoners whose only hope for resolution to their trials was to hurry the passing of time until their death. In contrast to this, Bonhoeffer found hope in the purposeful and sovereign will of God, who had placed him in the *sanctorum communio* of Jesus Christ. The sufferings which those in the *sanctorum communio* experienced were not without purpose but were given meaning in light of the sufferings of Christ. As Bonhoeffer wrote to his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, "We must now simply let go of what we cannot accomplish and confine ourselves to what we can and should do, namely, be manly and strong in the midst of suffering, trusting confidently in God."¹⁰⁶ Clearly this confident trust in God did not preclude the human feelings of fear and anxiety that Bonhoeffer felt in his situation. "How long, O LORD?" (Ps 13:1) was a very appropriate question to ask. It is even more appropriate to ask it of the one who holds all time in his hands.

One other reference to Ps 31:15 [HB 16] outside this letter adds to the picture of Bonhoeffer's appropriation of this psalm verse. It is found in a set of prayers Bonhoeffer wrote for his fellow prisoners. As Bethge describes in his biography, Bonhoeffer's relationship to the other prisoners was at first guided by fear. But in time he came to empathize for them, even to the point of using his influence to advocate for them in terms of improved care and prison conditions. Bethge explains how, around the time of Christmas 1943, Bonhoeffer "wrote prayers for the prisoners. These came from his own prayer, his daily use of the Psalter and the chorales.

¹⁰⁵ Included in the evidence of the impact of this verse on Bonhoeffer's evaluation of time in prison is the appearance of this reference on a number of random notes from this same period. See *DBWE* 8:72, 73.

¹⁰⁶ *DBWE* 8:70; *DBW* 8:60. This letter was written on May 5, 1943.

He left out nothing, either in the trinitarian address or in the biblical language. The prison chaplains, Hans Dannenbaum and Harald Poelchau, had obtained illegal entry to Bonhoeffer's cell and distributed the prayers among the cells."¹⁰⁷ Bonhoeffer's morning prayer read in part,

Triune God,

my Creator and my Savior,

this day belongs to you. *My time is in your hands.*

Holy, merciful God,

my Creator and my Savior,

my Judge and my Redeemer,

you know me and all my ways and actions.

You hate and punish evil in this and every world

without regard for person,

you forgive sins

for anyone who asks you sincerely,

and you love the good and reward it

on this earth with a clear conscience

and in the world to come with the crown of righteousness.

Before you I remember all those I love,

my fellow prisoners, and all

who in this house perform their difficult duty.

Lord, have mercy.

Grant me freedom again

and in the meantime let me live in such a way

that I can give account before [you] and others.

¹⁰⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 850.

Lord, whatever this day may bring—your name be praised.¹⁰⁸

Significant to the evaluation of Bonhoeffer’s use of Scripture in this prayer is Bethge’s description of these prayers in *Erstes Gebot und Zeitgeschichte*. These prayers, he writes, “belong to the most profound expressions of Bonhoeffer’s spirituality. They were not jotted down spontaneously but were composed after extended meditation and experienced discipline.”¹⁰⁹ It was this expression of support and encouragement toward his fellow prisoners that earned Bonhoeffer a favored status among many in the prison community.¹¹⁰ Bonhoeffer’s use of this phrase from Ps 31:15 [HB 16] shows how he continued to reflect on this truth well into the time of his imprisonment. What his use doesn’t show, however—not in his May 15, 1943 letter to his parents, nor in his written prayer for fellow prisoners—is an interpretive move toward his Finkenwalde conviction that Jesus prayed these prayers in his incarnation. An emphasis on this perspective would point to how God had answered this prayer in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and it would seem to bring even more encouragement by suggesting that, in the same way that Jesus Christ could confidently pray, “my times are in your hands” (Ps 31:15 [HB 16]), so Bonhoeffer (not to mention his fellow prisoners) could echo this same prayer and, in faith, submit his life into the hands of God his deliverer.

Conclusion: An Evaluation of Bonhoeffer’s Use of the Psalms During His Imprisonment

As this survey of Bonhoeffer’s use of the Psalms from prison reveals, this portion of the

¹⁰⁸ *DBWE* 8:196; *DBW* 8:206.

¹⁰⁹ Eberhard Bethge, *Erstes Gebot und Zeitgeschichte: Aufsätze und Reden, 1980–1990* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1990), 77.

¹¹⁰ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 849–50, describes how Bonhoeffer selflessly cared for his fellow-prisoners, one time refusing “the offer to take a cooler cell on the second floor because of the heat, since then another prisoner would have had to move into his cell.” Bethge also shares how, in one instance, Bonhoeffer used his own money to acquire legal help for a young prisoner who was not able to afford any.

biblical canon continued to have a substantial influence on Bonhoeffer's intellectual and theological understanding throughout the final years of his life. The fact that he turned so frequently to the prayers of the Psalms for personal, pastoral, homiletical, and doctrinal insight demonstrates his ongoing respect and reliance on them to guide and inform his faith and conduct. A key question this chapter of the dissertation pursues by means of its survey of these uses of the Psalms by Bonhoeffer is the question of consistency. Succinctly stated, *having presented and demonstrated a particular exegetical and interpretive approach toward the Psalms in his Finkenwalde era, in what way(s) does Bonhoeffer maintain that same approach into the latter years of his life? Are there any noticeable changes or evolutions to his approach that can be discerned (and explained) by this study?* Since I will be providing a thorough evaluation of Bonhoeffer's overall interpretation of the Psalms in the final chapter of this dissertation, I will here limit my observations to an analysis of his use and interpretation of the Psalms during this discrete period of his imprisonment.

As was mentioned above, Bonhoeffer's use of the Psalms in prison uniformly reflects the practice of selecting shorter pericope than was his custom prior to his imprisonment. The practice he began at Finkenwalde—and which he encouraged of his students in *Life Together*¹¹¹—was to read the Bible in a *lectio continuo* manner so as to benefit from an understanding of its full context. He demonstrated this approach in his sermons on Ps 42¹¹² and Ps 58¹¹³ where he dealt, in each case, with every verse of the whole psalm. Another example of this approach is his verse-by-verse treatment of Ps 119 in his partial commentary.¹¹⁴ Yet we

¹¹¹ *DBWE* 5:58–65; *DBW* 5:43–49.

¹¹² *DBWE* 14:845–54; *DBW* 14:851–60.

¹¹³ *DBWE* 14:963–70; *DBW* 14:980–88.

¹¹⁴ *DBWE* 15:496–526; *DBW* 15:499–535.

observe from his imprisonment uses that Bonhoeffer departs from this methodology, never once discussing a whole psalm in its entirety. The reasons for this are not clear, but should not, in my estimation, lead to the conclusion that this alone exposes a major change in his interpretive approach toward the Psalms. Rather, it could simply be a reflection of both the purposes for which he was writing and the unstable (prison) setting in which his writing took place. It does appear that in some instances—particularly in his devotional and personal writing—this “proof-texting” characteristic is influenced, in great part, by his reliance on the *Losungen* for his psalm text choices. As a regular practice, the *Losungen* rarely includes more than two verses of a psalm in its assigned readings.

Bonhoeffer’s “Christus in den Psalmen” lecture, along with *Life Together* and *Prayerbook*, all clearly state the fundamental role of prayer in Bonhoeffer’s interpretation and appropriation of the Psalter. This practice continued to be a point of emphasis for Bonhoeffer during his imprisonment, although it took on a different form than it had before his arrest. I have already commented on the benefits Bonhoeffer received in prison from his daily discipline of Scripture meditation and praying the Psalms. The limitations placed on him by his containment meant that his daily experience of this practice in prison had to be more individual in nature. Yet what Bonhoeffer persistently turned to in his days of confinement was the spiritual community of his many family, friends, and colleagues. Where Bonhoeffer may have been tempted to turn inward with his practice of prayer, this broader spiritual community—which interacted with him through letters, gifts, and personal visits—reminded him that he was not alone. Additionally, the request to write intercessory prayers for his fellow prisoners prompted him to pay attention to another community with which he shared similar experiences and needs. Beyond these, I should also mention Bonhoeffer’s abiding appreciation and awareness for his place in the church, the

sanctorum communio of Jesus Christ. As he described in *Life Together*, praying the Psalter reminds the church-community of its connection to the body of Christ,¹¹⁵ a fact which teaches the church-community that the one who prays the Psalter never prays alone.

The other foundational hermeneutical “pillar” of Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the Psalms that was expressed during his time at Finkenwalde was its relationship to Jesus Christ the crucified one. Bonhoeffer wrote in *Prayerbook* that “[i]f we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible, and especially the psalms, we must not, therefore, first ask what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus.”¹¹⁶ He argues that the prayerbook of the Bible is the church-community’s prayerbook only because it was first the prayerbook of Jesus Christ. While one might want to assume that this focus on Jesus as the historical, existential, theological, and interpretive center of the Psalter continued to shape Bonhoeffer’s reading of the Psalms during this period, there is no evidence in his actual comments that this was the case. Instead, Bonhoeffer’s interpretive approach toward the Psalms during this time seems to place greater emphasis on the original context of the psalm, oftentimes a Davidic context. The connection Bonhoeffer then makes to the psalm is by means of analogy, not so much Christology. In some instances, this reoriented connection to the psalm is reflected in Bonhoeffer’s discussion of the language of a psalm. Or, in other cases, it is expressed in the human dimension of the prayer as it intersects with real human experiences of *Anfechtung* and other forms of spiritual and physical need. Again, this may signal a change in Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutic, or it may reflect the fact that the Christological dimension of his interpretation has become implicit, leaving more room for the anthropological dimension.

Important to the comparative nature of this chapter—in which I have considered

¹¹⁵ *DBWE* 5:57; *DBW* 5:42.

¹¹⁶ *DBWE* 5:157; *DBW* 5:108–9.

Bonhoeffer's latest work in the Psalms in contrast to his earlier work—I have sought to explicate the documents in which Bonhoeffer's imprisonment use overlaps with his use of similar texts from the periods of his academic training, pastoral work, and Confessing Church leadership. I have determined from this comparison that a number of examples from Bonhoeffer's imprisonment use of the Psalms reveal a change from how he previously interpreted them. The biggest change appears to be the way he backs away from the Christological approach he proposed at Finkenwalde. In his earlier writings he encouraged an interpretation of the Psalms which viewed them fundamentally as prayers in the mouth of the incarnate Son of God. He showed much less concern at that time with the original, Davidic context of the Psalms and instead emphasized their use by Jesus in his incarnation. Jesus prayed the prayers of the Psalter and God answered his prayers. Therefore, he proposed, when the church-community prays these same prayers in union with Jesus, they share a similar anticipation of the outcome and deliverance which Jesus experienced. This interpretive perspective is not clearly transferred by Bonhoeffer into his imprisonment use of the Psalms. For this reason, I would propose that there is no evidence of evolution or development of Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms in the time of his imprisonment, but that the evidence shows instead a *change* in the way he reads them. His way of reading the Psalms reflects an approach embraced by early pre-modern interpreters who emphasized Jesus as the subject and object of the Psalms, but not necessarily as the primary speaker of the Psalms—and certainly not as one who prayed the Psalter in his incarnation. Without an apologetic from Bonhoeffer for this move, I can only theorize the reasons for this change, which may involve the nature of Bonhoeffer's personal and political context in prison as well as the type or genre of writing that he was employing during this time.

Regardless of this Christological change, I would still emphasize what I see in Bonhoeffer's imprisonment writings as a consistent understanding of the ability of the Psalms to provide a concrete means of experiencing God's presence and spiritual encouragement. Bonhoeffer's use of the Psalms contributed to the strengthening of his faith and gave him the perspective and fortitude to accept his fate—as unknown and uncertain as it was—and to know that, no matter the outcome, God is still his helper and deliverer.

CHAPTER SIX

A SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S CHRISTOLOGICAL EXEGESIS OF THE PSALMS

Bonhoeffer's Christological Exegesis of the Psalms: A Summary

This dissertation is built on two convictions. The first is that the hermeneutical approach toward the Psalms shaped and practiced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer contributes something new to the history of Psalms interpretation. The second is that, while many aspects of Bonhoeffer's theology have earned deserved attention in the decades since his passing, the one area of study that is under-represented in Bonhoeffer scholarship is the study of the development, coherence, qualities, and significance of his particular Christological interpretation of the Psalms. In working to fill this gap I began this study by surveying in brief the history of interpretation of the Psalms according to the broad historical arcs of the premodern and modern eras. In this survey, I gave special attention to the presuppositions and approaches that moved exegetes toward an interpretation of the Psalms in relation to Jesus Christ. I determined from this overview that premodern exegetes held to a Christological perspective of the Psalms that was broadly accepted and pursued, but that, in the modern era, this perspective became problematized and was largely displaced in favor of the pursuit of historical, sociological, psychological, and cultic concerns.

In my second chapter, I narrowed my historical focus and explored the views toward the Old Testament that were held by biblical scholars in Bonhoeffer's immediate, early twentieth century context. I identified three basic views which have been recognized from that period of time: that of the *rejection* of the Old Testament, the partial *retention* of the Old Testament, and the *full acceptance* of the Old Testament as the word of God. I provided evidence for locating

Bonhoeffer within the third, *full acceptance* group and then described the exegetical and theological influences which contributed to the formation and distinguishing of his own particular hermeneutic of Scripture and of the Psalms. I finished this chapter with a presentation of Bonhoeffer's early exegesis of the Psalms as demonstrated by two of his sermons on psalm texts.

This opened the way for the third chapter, which is the heart of this dissertation. In this chapter, I examined Bonhoeffer's writings on the Psalms from 1935–1940, the main era of his leadership in the Confessing Church. This period included the years he taught at and directed the Confessing Church Preacher's Seminary at Finkenwalde (1935–1937). Through a presentation and analysis of his writings on the Psalms from this time—which included his sermon on Ps 42, his “Christus in den Psalmen” lecture, his sermon on Ps 58, his *Life Together* publication, and his *Prayerbook of the Bible* publication—I contended that Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms was built upon two hermeneutical pillars: the Psalter's relationship to prayer and its relationship to Jesus Christ the crucified one. I proposed that the new element in Bonhoeffer's interpretation is the way in which he situates Jesus Christ at the hermeneutical center of the Psalter as one who prayed the Psalms in his incarnation. It is this shape of cruciform interpretation of the Psalms which enables Bonhoeffer to view the Psalms not only as the prayerbook of Christ, but, now, in an inherited sense, as the prayerbook of the church. In his interpretation of the Psalter Bonhoeffer hears the voice of Christ, praying *for* and now *with* his church. When the church prays the prayers of the Psalms today, they are praying inspired words which were also the very words of Jesus. Jesus's prayer has, through the means of the Psalter, become the church's prayer. The Psalter is then given a reoriented perspective and renewed authority because of Jesus.

The presentation in chapter four of Bonhoeffer's partial commentary on Ps 119—the only

verse-by-verse, commentary-style document he published—validates his long-standing appreciation for this psalm and demonstrates his particular hermeneutic while also explicating his understanding of the relationship of the church’s life and faith to the instruction or *torah* of God. In the fifth chapter, which surveyed Bonhoeffer’s use of the Psalms in the final years of his life while in Nazi containment, I provided evidence of Bonhoeffer’s ongoing practice of praying the Psalms and demonstrated ways in which he reapplied his interpretation of them for himself and others in this new context through the hermeneutical lenses of prayer and of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection.

Based on this presentation and analysis of Bonhoeffer’s Christological interpretation of the Psalms, I am now able to offer my assessment of his approach and methods in light of current scholarship in the field of biblical studies. I will offer an evaluation of what I see as the strengths and weakness of Bonhoeffer’s contributions to the history of interpretation of the Psalms, and following that, will conclude with suggestions for how I believe Bonhoeffer’s work in the Psalms is able to contribute to current and future. In this final chapter, I will not explicitly revisit my earlier work or incorporate many footnotes, but will instead assume the reader’s knowledge of earlier chapters, drawing out applications of what has already been presented for its contribution to the aforementioned areas of study and inquiry.

Bonhoeffer’s Christological Interpretation of the Psalms: An Assessment

Strengths of Bonhoeffer’s Christological Interpretation of the Psalms

Throughout this study of Bonhoeffer’s Christological interpretation of the Psalms I have highlighted numerous aspects to Bonhoeffer’s approach which served him and his context well. These benefits can, in many instances, also be applied to our current-day context. For this reason, I do not need to repeat or add extensive comments to what I have already identified as strengths

of Bonhoeffer's interpretive approach toward the Psalms. Instead, I will limit my evaluation of strengths in this chapter to just three main statements. The first is that *Bonhoeffer's approach to interpreting the Psalms provides a way in which the church can read, understand, and appropriate this Old Testament book in a Christ-focused manner.* Many Christians today struggle with how to read and interpret the Old Testament. Although most conservative Christians would subscribe to a statement of faith that professes a belief in the Bible, including both Old and New Testaments, as the verbally and plenary inspired Word of God, it is not uncommon for these same Christians to act like "functional Marcionites" in the way they actually interact with the Old Testament. Many people operate with a false hermeneutical dichotomy that views the Old Testament (including the Psalms) as "law" and the New Testament as "gospel." Their interpretations moralize the Old Testament while looking to the New Testament alone for a witness to Jesus Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological approach toward the Psalter does not allow this bifurcated practice to continue. His interpretation opens up the Psalms to a way of reading which situates Jesus Christ at the center, hearing in them the voice of Jesus Christ, and seeing in them the salvation won by Jesus Christ. It accomplishes this through its close association of the prayers of the Psalms to the incarnation and the cross of Christ. I believe this interpretive approach toward the Psalms can provide be a faithful means for the church to read the Old Testament Scriptures, and, in particular, the Psalms, in the way that Jesus proposes in Jn 5:39 and in Lk 24:27, 44.

Second, when practiced individually and corporately, I believe *Bonhoeffer's method of interpreting and praying the Psalms serves his goal—and the needs of the church in every generation—to bring about revitalization of the church's faith and mission in the world.* It accomplishes this in two ways. First of all, the two "pillars" of Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic of the

Psalms focus the church on two components readily recognized as essential for growth in Christian faith and Christian mission: namely, the practice of regular prayer and the belief in the substitutionary and atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Without these elements present in the church, there is little hope for vibrant spiritual life and effective Gospel mission to others. I believe Bonhoeffer recognized this, and it contributed to the shape of his own spiritual practices as well as to the daily structure he established at Finkenwalde. Secondly, not to be overlooked in his method is the way in which it assists the church to, in the words of Jesus in Jn 15:7, “remain in me and [have] my words remain in you.” In an historical and religious context that was, by Bonhoeffer’s every assessment, growing increasingly secular, his great desire was for the word of God to speak to the needs of the people in Nazi Germany. In our modern-day context—an era which is regularly described by theologians and missiologists as “post-Christian”—we, too, need the word of God to shape and inform our mission. As he demonstrated in his Ps 119 commentary, Bonhoeffer believed the word of God established and sustained the life and activities of each believer. Therefore, the more the church can meditate on God’s revealed word and allow it to inform its thinking and acting, the more likely it will be that the church is prepared to “be the church” in an increasingly secular, post-Christian world. This vision overlaps with Bonhoeffer’s concern for a renewed and reinvigorated understanding and experience of biblical discipleship in the church. Praying the words of Scripture, as Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*, teaches us how to pray, opens our prayers up to the needs of the world-wide church, and unites us with Jesus Christ, who fulfills the Psalms and who now prays them with us in his eternal intercession for us.

A third and final strength I recognize in Bonhoeffer’s Christological interpretation and appropriation of the Psalms is that *it provides, particularly as demonstrated in the latter years of*

his life, an example of a faith-filled response to persecution that doesn't err to either extreme of, on one side, complacent fatalism or, on the other, vengeful reactionism. The path that Bonhoeffer charted between these two poles in the latter five years of his life has left many theologians and historians with no small amount of bewilderment as to his intentions and actions. To what degree was he a pacifist? a revolutionary? Exactly how active was he in the efforts to assassinate the Führer? Had he committed himself toward this mission, or was he merely accepting of it as one way (perhaps the last and final option available) to release the German people from the grip of a tyrannical dictator? Many others have taken up these questions in a way that encompasses the fuller scope of Bonhoeffer's intellectual and ethical judgments. What I see in his example, however, particularly from the time of his imprisonment, is a desire and commitment to view his experience of *Anfechtung* and persecution *coram Deo*. This commitment may have left Bonhoeffer (and us) with a number of "loose ends" in terms of the way he systematized his ethical response to these experiences. Yet, at the least, it served to keep him tethered to a biblical and theological worldview which operated on a belief in the ultimate sovereignty of God over all the powers of the world and in the present and advancing kingdom of God despite the appearances to the contrary on the global political stage. This example, while running the risk of being underappreciated in many "first world" or "developed" countries today, is not lost on those who themselves experience levels of persecution and oppression that far outweigh even what Bonhoeffer himself encountered in Nazi Germany.

Weaknesses of Bonhoeffer's Christological Interpretation of the Psalms

The numerous strengths of Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms and his appropriation of them in his context do not cloud the fact that there are also a number of aspects to his approach that raise questions and critiques from biblical scholars and exegetes. First

among these is the question of *the legitimacy of Jesus's relationship to the Psalter in the way that Bonhoeffer presented*. Did Jesus really have the kind of relationship to the Psalter that Bonhoeffer says he did? Can it legitimately be said of Jesus—from both an historical and an exegetical basis—that he was taught to pray the Psalter as a Hebrew boy and that he, thus, regularly prayed the whole Psalter as his prayerbook during the time of his incarnation? Any historical information we would have to support this claim is not specific to Jesus's own experience, but is based merely on the knowledge of what was typical of the Jewish tradition in the first century AD. What's more, the biblical and exegetical evidence we have for this claim is, arguably, lacking in quantitative biblical data, being based primarily on Jesus's quotation of Ps 22:1 [HB 2] from the cross in Mt 27:46. Yet, as I stated in my summary in chapter 3, Bonhoeffer did not appear to need much more than this—certainly when added to the description of Jesus as a teacher of prayer in Luke 11:1 and of proper Christological hermeneutics of the Old Testament in Lk 24:44—to establish this claim. From there he felt substantiated to move forward in his development of a system and a theological and interpretive framework which situated at its core the literal-historical activity of Jesus Christ praying the Psalms in his incarnation.

A second weakness in Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms—and one closely related to the first—is *the sometimes confusing systematic design of his Christology*. I discussed this issue briefly in the conclusion of chapter three as I interacted with what Bonhoeffer presented in his "Christus in den Psalmen" lecture and his sermon on Ps 58. There, I noted that Bonhoeffer had the tendency to shift the "center" of his Christological perspective on the Psalms a number of different directions. At times, he emphasized the act of Jesus's praying the Psalms in his incarnation for his own needs. At other times, he focused on Jesus's praying the prayers of the Psalter on behalf of all believers. In "Christus in den Psalmen," he spoke about Jesus's eternal

intercession as High Priest before the throne of God. In that same lecture and in *Prayerbook* he highlighted Jesus's "partnering with" the church-community today as they pray these same prayers out of their own need. Perhaps the most confusing expression of all his Christological moves is found in his sermon on Ps 58 where he presents Jesus as both the pray-er of Ps 58's imprecations and the one who is, at the same time, being prayed against. As I noted in chapter three, all of this begs the question of the systematic and theological consistency of this hermeneutic, as well as the exegetical evidence on which these conclusions are based. Further comparative study of his early Christological and exegetical writings in relation to his post-Finkenwalde and imprisonment writings could help bring about a more-informed understanding of his Christology, helping us to see if these characteristics remain, or if they were, perhaps, concepts he experimented with in his earlier writings, but later left behind.

A third weakness of Bonhoeffer's approach is *the cumbersome process he often employed to get to the final place where the Psalms could be prayed by the Christian church in light of Jesus*. Martin Kuske shares this concern, and expresses it within his critique of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of Ps 58. He writes,

Hence, if we want to join in praying this psalm, as Bonhoeffer describes at the end of his sermon [on Ps 58] . . . , then we must consciously achieve a new interpretation. We can join in praying the words of the psalm only if we are conscious of another dimension of its meaning. The question is whether or not we have such a freedom in relation to the Bible that we can say what this psalm says with other words which require no completely new interpretation, if Christ lays claim to it. In the sermon everything that Bonhoeffer asserted can be enlarged upon, but to be conscious of everything in praying is an excessive demand and an unnecessary, difficult imposition.¹

Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms—especially his interpretation of certain lament and imprecatory psalms—does indeed open them up to be used within the Christian

¹ Kuske, *Old Testament*, 91.

church, but questions remain as to the appropriateness and validity of the exegetical moves needed to arrive at that point. The “cumbersome” nature to Bonhoeffer’s approach might also be attributed to the general absence of an eschatological perspective in his interpretation. He anchors his interpretation theologically in terms of God’s activity in Jesus Christ, but doesn’t often move beyond the cross. In this way he misses an opportunity to align his interpretation in the fundamental trajectory of the biblical metanarrative toward Christ’s coming—which was experienced by the Old Testament psalmist in Jesus’s incarnation, and will be experienced again in Jesus second and final return.

A fourth critique of Bonhoeffer’s particular Christological interpretation of the Psalms is the way it *diminishes the significance of the original “BC” setting enroute to what might be viewed as a truncated theological move to Jesus Christ*. This aspect to Bonhoeffer’s Christological interpretation of the Psalms—namely, his practice of looking past the original historical context of the Psalms in favor of an incarnationally-rooted, Christ-focused reading—is arguably the clearest evidence of a way in which Bonhoeffer’s interpretation as a reaction against the prevailing historical-critical interpretation of the Psalms holding sway in his early twentieth century context. The predominant assessment of the value of “Christological interpretation” of the Psalms in the academic circles of the early twentieth century was meager, at best. Bonhoeffer experienced first-hand at Berlin University what this method did with the Scriptures, and he sought to take a different approach which would allow the Psalms to be of service to the church, not just the academicians. In what I see as an over-correction on his part, Bonhoeffer moved beyond the modern, historical-critical fixation on the original BC context of the Psalms and set his gaze firmly on the first-century setting of Jesus’s incarnation. In doing so, Bonhoeffer, in effect, made the original historical context of psalmists such David, Asaph, Solomon, and the

sons of Korah irrelevant, as long as the prayers they wrote could still find meaningful application for the church of his day. This pattern, along with Bonhoeffer's general neglect of the study of the Hebrew language of the Psalms, seems to go against the many helpful changes that Luther introduced in his *Dictata* and *Operationes* lectures. If Bonhoeffer's effect on enriching the church's attitudes toward the Old Testament is to have its greatest impact, his interpretation of the Psalms may need to be nuanced so that it gives more consideration to how the original BC context of the psalmist can serve a faithful and relevant reading of the Psalms today and, like Luther, help us feel our shared experience with the original psalmist in longing for the coming of Jesus Christ. If this aspect to Bonhoeffer's interpretive method is not corrected, his whole approach may be dismissed because of the way it appears to "steal" the Psalms from the hands of the Jews.² Yet, if it can be corrected through an appropriate grammatical-historical consideration of the original setting of the Psalms, I believe Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation can have an even greater benefit.

A fifth weakness in Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms is *its lack of attention to the Second Coming of Christ in favor of an emphasis on Christ's first coming*. This is especially distinctive in Bonhoeffer's sermon on Ps 58 in which he makes no mention of the ultimate judgment to come upon Christ's second advent. His emphasis instead is primarily on the event of the cross. It might be said that the *Sitz im Leben* Bonhoeffer works with for his interpretation of the Psalms is the *Sitz im Leben* of Good Friday and the cross of Christ. As important as this is in aiding the church to live in the midst of enemies who are bringing oppression and persecution, it should also be stated that of equal importance to the way the

² For more on this see the assessment of Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic by Walter Harrelson, "Bonhoeffer and the Bible" in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. by Martin Marty (New York: Association, 1962), 115–39. Helpful for correcting this weakness in Bonhoeffer's approach would be a study of Luther's lectures on the Psalms, and particularly Hendrix's discussion of this topic in *Ecclesia in Via*, 143–287.

church interprets and evaluates our faith-induced suffering is the hope we have of the final judgment and defeat of the wicked (Is 66:24), the kingdoms of this world (Dn 2:44–45) and, ultimately, of Satan himself and his angels (Rv 19:11–15; 20:7–10).

A sixth and final weakness I recognize in Bonhoeffer's overall hermeneutic of the Psalms concerns *the question of the consistency with which he employs his method in various settings of his life and with various portions of the Psalter*. My analysis of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms into the later years of his life sought, in part, to shed light on the question of consistency in Bonhoeffer's particular approach. In my chapter summaries and periodic evaluative statements, I have already identified aspects of Bonhoeffer's exegesis and interpretation that, in my opinion, reflect a consistent practice—or at least a steady trajectory—in terms of its methods, moves, and conclusions. Yet it cannot be denied that Bonhoeffer makes certain emphases in the Finkenwalde era which he does not appear to repeat in his Ps 119 commentary or in his uses of the Psalms from prison. For example, Bonhoeffer does not appear to speak of Jesus's eternal intercession before the throne of God—and his use of the prayers of the Psalms in this activity—beyond his “Christus in den Psalmen” lecture (1935). The reason for this is not altogether clear. Perhaps this was an idea he was exploring at the time of this lecture, but about which he subsequently thought differently. Nor does Bonhoeffer maintain into the latter years of his life his Finkenwalde conviction of the reality of Jesus praying the prayers of the Psalter in his incarnation, and how this serves to frame our current interpretation and application of the Psalms in our own praying of them. Instead, he appears to change his interpretive perspective to something more akin to a pre-modern “Jesus as subject and object” approach. One last observation along these lines is that Bonhoeffer does not seem to apply his particular Christological interpretation of the Psalms across the full spectrum of the Psalter's

poetic genres. While he does suggest, in general terms, an interpretive approach toward the Psalter's various themes, a review of the categories of psalms that he interprets more substantially in his works shows an orbit around the categories of lament, imprecatory, and torah psalms. There is no record of any substantive application of his hermeneutic upon royal psalms (such as Pss 97–99), messianic psalms (such as Pss 2, 110), thanksgiving psalms/hymns (such as Pss 100), wisdom psalms (such as Ps 73), or hallelujah psalms (such as Pss 146–150). If subsequent work on Bonhoeffer's contributions to the history of interpretation of the Psalms should spring from this dissertation, a worthwhile project might be to apply Bonhoeffer's hermeneutical approach to this type of broader range of psalm categories, and to thus prove whether or not it is able to bear the weight of the whole Psalter.

The Contributions of This Dissertation to Current Scholarship

The focus of this dissertation is on the Christological interpretation of the Psalms as formed and practiced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. However, I also believe that some of the data and insights I have presented here can be of service to others who are researching related topics. If this present work can be of service to other projects (scholarly or otherwise), the author would be humbly gratified. To that end, I conclude this dissertation by suggesting three areas of study which I believe could benefit from and build on what I've presented.

The Church's Practice of Praying the Psalms

In recent years, new publications have demonstrated a revived interest in the ancient practice of praying the Psalms. In their writing, some authors have taken a "renewal" approach in which they invite the church of today into this long-forgotten spiritual practice by exploring its

origins and early expressions.³ Other scholars have sought to defend and resource this practice for use within a liturgical setting.⁴ Still others have attempted to promote this practice for its benefits to the ministry of pastoral or spiritual care.⁵

As an ancient practice, the praying of the Psalter found its most fertile soil within the monasteries. Augustine learned to pray the psalms under the influence of the monastery. Centuries later, Luther, formed as he was within that same Augustinian tradition, became quite knowledgeable of the Psalms and valued them highly in terms of their contribution to the canon, to the formulation of doctrine, and to the life of the church. Luther understood the Psalter as a primer for prayer and, as Scott Hendrix describes, Luther believed that “[t]he right approach to the Psalter was not to analyze it as a textbook about the proper relation to God but to see it as a laboratory in which to practice that relationship while praying the text.”⁶

As I have described in this dissertation, the influence of the monastery was also significant for the way Bonhoeffer came to read and interpret the Psalms. In chapter two I mentioned the ecclesiological epiphany Bonhoeffer experienced on his trip to Rome in the summer of 1923. Here he was captured, perhaps for the first time, by the beauty and substance of the (Roman

³ Gordon Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalm* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Howard Neil Wallace, *Words to God, Word from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005); Laurence Kriegshauser, *Praying the Psalms in Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009); James W. Sire, *Praying the Psalms of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007); John C. Endres, “Praying the Psalms: A School of Prayer” in *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, ed. Stephen Breck Reid (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 62–77.

⁴ John D. Witvliet, “Words to Grow Into: The Psalms as Formative Speech,” in *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship*, ed. C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2012); John D. Witvliet, “Praying the Psalms in Christian Worship” in *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 45–130.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: HarperOne, 1998).

⁶ Scott Hendrix, “Luther against the Backdrop,” 235. This prayerful approach toward the Psalter matched Luther’s general approach toward Scripture, as Hendrix highlights: “Not only the Psalter was subject to illumination from experience. Luther’s procedure for studying all of Scripture stressed the tuning of the interpreter to the text. One should pray for the illumination of the Spirit, meditate verbatim on the text, and relate the text to the trials (*tentationes; Anfechtungen*) of one’s own life. Only in this way could one learn ‘not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom’ (*WA* 50, 659.1–600.4. *LW* 34: 285–87).”

Catholic) church. Following the completion of his first dissertation in 1927, a systematic treatment on the nature of the church, Bonhoeffer organized a number of informal weekend retreats with his confirmands in which he sought to foster an experience of spiritual communal living centered around the Scriptures. In the spring of 1935—between the time of his pastorates in London and his return to Germany—he visited a number of Anglican monasteries, which exposed him even more intimately to an expression of monastic thought and practice. Besides making a contribution to his growing understanding of the Psalms, these monastic visits aided in the formation of the new vision for pastoral training that he implemented at Finkenwalde, one which was labeled by some of his critics (inside and outside of the seminary) as a type of “monastic Protestantism.” At Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer established the *Bruderhaus*, a spiritual “community within a community” where they practiced life together around a shared vision, mission, and community experience. After the close of Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer sought refuge more than once in the monastic center in Ettal, a place where he was renewed in the daily discipline of prayer and Scripture reading. It was these monastic-like spiritual practices which kept Bonhoeffer rooted in the Scriptures and, as I described in chapter five, sustained him throughout his months in Nazi prison.

It is my contention that the monastic influence on Augustine and on Luther—two of the most significant Psalms scholars in the history of Psalms interpretation—also motivated Bonhoeffer toward the exploration of the Psalms and toward his unique approach of interpreting them in light of Jesus Christ. In light of the recent interest in this practice of praying the Psalms, I believe this study on Bonhoeffer’s Christological interpretation of the Psalms could spark further research into the influence of the monastic tradition on Psalms scholars—whether or not these scholars embraced or reacted against this tradition—as well as to the contribution of the

monastic tradition to Psalms interpretation, Christological interpretation of the Psalms, and the communal use of the Psalms in prayer.

Additionally important to the exploration of the presuppositions and application of the practice of praying the Psalms is the event I have earlier described as Bonhoeffer's "conversion" or "turning toward the Scriptures." Besides the shared exposure to the traditions and daily spiritual disciplines of Scripture study and prayer that make up much of the monastic experience, Augustine, Luther, and Bonhoeffer all three gave evidence of some sort of spiritual "turning" in their lives that changed the way they understood and evaluated the Bible. This "turning" resulted, in all three instances, in a reinvigorated study of the Scriptures by means of a newly reoriented hermeneutic that then fueled a reformation in their interpretation. This experience—as seen within the unique context of each of these men—cannot be stressed enough.

Reflection should be given in the current discussion of the presuppositions and practice of praying the Psalms to the association that one's view of Scripture has with one's Christological interpretation of the Psalms. A fair question to pursue in this discussion in light of Bonhoeffer's approach is whether he would have arrived at his unique Christological understanding of the Psalms had he not gone through such a "conversion" from modern historical-critical to premodern pre-critical presuppositions and goals—and, therefore, how essential is this type of hermeneutical orientation to the formation and intellectually-satisfying application of his type of Christological interpretation and appropriation of the Psalms?

Bonhoeffer's Contribution to the Current Practice of Theological Interpretation of Scripture

A second area to which this dissertation may contribute is the practice of theological interpretation of Scripture. The inclusion of a theological concern in the processes of biblical interpretation is far from unknown in the tradition of biblical studies. As my overview in chapter

one demonstrated, premodern exegetes often sought to draw out theological truths in their interpretation of the Psalms in such a way as to spiritually edify the church. This concern, while not completely ignored in the modern era, came to be significantly restrained in the years following the Reformation, as the academic centers of learning took over the primary *loci* of biblical studies from the church. Further challenges to this concern were introduced as the single field of theological study came to be divided into unique “disciplines” of theological inquiry, namely, New Testament Studies, Old Testament Studies, Systematic Theology, Historical Theology, and Practical Theology. In this new, scientifically-guided framework, theologians increasingly carried out their tasks with presuppositions, methods, and tools specific to their unique discipline. As a result, lines of demarcation were drawn that often created an unhelpful separation between departments, thus hindering the once-unified theological program of “articulating, shaping and embodying convictions about God, humanity, and the world.”⁷ The sad result of this trajectory for both the church and for the study of the Bible, according to Stephen E. Fowl, is that, “[w]hile most biblical scholars of both Testaments still continue to identify themselves as Christians, they generally are required to check their theological convictions at the door when they enter the profession of biblical studies.”⁸ In recent decades, the imposition of certain “agenda-driven” approaches in biblical interpretation—for example, the socially-, culturally-, politically-, and economically-driven approaches employed by theologians of liberation, feminism, or ecological concern—have continued to muddy the waters of biblical interpretation, yielding a diffuse and, at times, highly subjective output.

Into this malaise, proponents of a *theological interpretation of Scripture* seek to introduce

⁷ Stephen E. Fowl, “Introduction” in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), xiii.

⁸ Fowl, “Introduction,” xiii–xiv.

an interpretive approach which successfully traverses what Kevin J. Vanhoozer calls the “ugly ditch” between exegesis and theology—where faith and the Bible are kept apart for fear of “‘dogmatic captivity’ to confessional and theological traditions⁹—and the “muddy ditch” between exegesis and ideology—where one’s subjective concerns and agenda control (and limit) the interpretive outcome of study. At the heart of a theological interpretation of Scripture is its “concern for hearing the word of God in the church today.”¹⁰ The way it goes about “hearing the word of God in the church” is, as Stephen E. Fowl says, “non-modern in several respects.”¹¹

First, it will be interested in premodern biblical interpretation. Second, it will shape and be shaped by the concerns of Christian communities seeking to live faithfully before the triune God rather than by the concerns of a discipline whose primary allegiance is to the academy. Third, theological interpretation of scripture will try to reject and resist the fragmentation of theology into a set of discrete disciplines that was the result of the conceptual aims of modernity and the practical result of professionalization. Finally, theological interpretation of scripture will be pluralistic in its interpretative methods; it will even use the interpretive methods of modernity to its own ends.¹²

Working with these convictions, theological interpretation of Scripture sets about its task of revisiting the biblical texts, by use of the best exegetical methods, for the benefit of church.

Even though few scholars engaged in the practice of theological interpretation of Scripture use Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a model,¹³ it is my observation that Bonhoeffer’s approach falls squarely into its goals and parameters—if, for no other reason, that every one of the

⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Introduction: What is a Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*; ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 18.

¹⁰ Vanhoozer, “Introduction,” 21.

¹¹ Fowl, “Introduction,” xvi.

¹² Fowl, “Introduction,” xvi.

¹³ One of the few exceptions to this fact is the aforementioned book edited by Stephen E. Fowl, *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. In this book, on a section devoted to the theological interpretation of Matt 5–7, Fowl incorporates, 285–93, a chapter from Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship (DBWE/DBW 4)*, along with chapters containing excerpts from John Chrysostom’s Homilies on Matthew (239–47), and Martin Luther’s Sermons on the Sermon the Mount (248–61).

characteristics listed in the quote above can be identified in Bonhoeffer's mature interpretation of the Psalms. This conviction is given further support by those scholars who align Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms as "theological," including Geoffrey B. Kelly, who gave Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms a "theological" description in his introduction to *Prayerbook*,¹⁴ and by Brian Brock, who titled Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms an "exegetical-theological" approach similar to Augustine and Luther.¹⁵ In light of this, I believe a more thorough examination of Bonhoeffer's place within the intellectual and theological context of the early twentieth century—and how his mature hermeneutical and interpretive approaches toward the Psalms came to be defined and practiced—could yield valuable insight for the current and future discussion of the shape and place of theological interpretation of Scripture.

The Relationship of Luther to Bonhoeffer's Interpretation of the Psalms

The last area of study in which this dissertation might contribute involves the influence of Luther on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his interpretation of the Psalms. This is a topic that I have only been briefly addressed in this dissertation, but one that is worthy of further exploration, not just for the benefit of Bonhoeffer studies but also for the insight it might offer to the areas of Luther studies and the study of early twentieth-century theology. Karl Holl was Bonhoeffer's initial source of learning about Luther and Luther's theology.¹⁶ Yet, as I have noted above, once Bonhoeffer gained a solid foundation from Holl, he soon came to hold a differing point of view on the proper interpretation of Luther.¹⁷

¹⁴ In the "Editor's Introduction," *Prayerbook*, *DBWE* 5:144, Geoffrey B. Kelly states: "With due regard to the merits of other approaches [including historical-critical approaches], Bonhoeffer declared his intention to go beyond these scholarly analyses in order to offer, instead, a *theological* interpretation of the Psalter." Emphasis original.

¹⁵ Brock, *Singing*, 71–95.

¹⁶ Barker, *The Cross of Reality*, 52, suggests that the most lasting impact Holl's instruction on Luther came from his teaching on Luther's view of the doctrine of justification.

¹⁷ Barker, *The Cross of Reality*, 52, 71–74. Barker, 74–75, writes: "Siding with Luther over against Holl and

Bonhoeffer's dependence on Luther in his writings on the Psalms is arguably more implicit than explicit. In Bonhoeffer's major writings on the Psalms—the ones which I have examined in this dissertation—he directly cites Luther only eighteen times, the most prevalent uses occurring in his commentary on Ps 119 (six citations), *Prayerbook* (seven citations) and *Life Together* (nine citations).¹⁸ These citations give evidence of Bonhoeffer's interaction—and great agreement—with Luther on his view of the relationship between the Psalms and prayer, and for his evaluation of Ps 119 as paradigmatic among the Psalms for its presentation of the Psalter's themes and theology of the Word. Barker, in his book on the relationship of Bonhoeffer's Christology to Luther's *theologia crucis*, does exemplary work in exploring the evidence showing Bonhoeffer's implicit dependence on Luther. But Barker's work, focused as it is on Bonhoeffer's overall Christology, stops short of contributing much to this topic of his dependence on Luther for the formulation of his particular Christological interpretation of the Psalms.

One author whose work on Luther's interpretation of Scripture that does offer valuable insight to this topic is Scott Hendrix. Hendrix analyzes Luther's interpretation of Scripture, including his interpretation of the Psalms, in his sixteenth century context and identifies patterns in Luther's approach which, I propose, are similar to Bonhoeffer's approach. For example, I have noted in this chapter that Bonhoeffer doesn't always appear consistent with the nature of his Christological reading of the Psalms. Sometimes he “reverts” to a more traditional prophetic or theological reading, hardly mentioning Jesus or the cross. Hendrix describes this same type of

other modern theologians, Bonhoeffer insisted that the central theological question was that of justification, which, out of necessity, is tied to Christology, for salvation comes through Christ alone. It was Holl's mistake to base his understanding of justification on the first commandment rather than Christology. If we read Bonhoeffer's theology as a response to this development in modern theology, we can see the reason for the radical concentration on Jesus Christ; his understanding of justification demands it.”

¹⁸ In addition to these, Bonhoeffer cites Luther once in his “Christus in den Psalmen” lecture, and once in his sermon on Ps 42.

occurrence in Luther's interpretation:

The discovery of a theologically edifying meaning apart from a christological interpretation of an Old Testament text stands in striking contrast to the tendency of late medieval exegesis. However, Luther did not approach the text devoid of all theological prejudice. He extracted the meaning of godly and ungodly while bringing to the text a previously acquired understanding of faith and its priority over works. This grammatical and theological approach did not rule out a christological interpretation, however, if that would best express the meaning of the psalm.... [Yet, t]he legitimate sense could also involve the experience of the Old Testament faithful.¹⁹

On the basis of this description (which could be argued), Luther prioritized a reading of the Psalms which he believed was both faithful to the intention of the text and to the needs of the reader, even as his interpretation may or may not be "Christological" on the basis of vocabulary or theological focus. This practice may set Luther up for the charge of being "subjective," which Hendrix acknowledges:

The danger of utilizing the experience of the reader was a rampant subjectivism which imposed an extraneous meaning on Scripture. Luther admitted the danger but claimed from his earliest days at the lectern that the power of Scripture was such that it was not changed into the one who studied it but instead transformed its admirer into itself and into its own powers (WA 3, 397.9–11). Scripture could indeed be called its own interpreter.²⁰

Hendrix then adds, "there was for Luther a sense in which Scripture was not fully interpreted until it encountered and illumined the life of the addressee."²¹ Although one might think this end-goal would be aided by an explicit connection to Jesus Christ, this characteristic was not always materialized in his actual interpretation.

Luther's growing emphasis on the "operation of the text on the reader and hearer" *today* is

¹⁹ Scott Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," *Interp* 37, no. 3 (July 1983): 233.

²⁰ Hendrix, "Luther Against the Backdrop," 236.

²¹ Hendrix, "Luther Against the Backdrop," 236.

highlighted by Hendrix in Luther's 1519–1521 Psalms lectures.²² This practice, I believe, is mirrored in Bonhoeffer, for example, as he reflected on the prison cell scribbles in his May 15, 1943 letter to his parents. Here, Bonhoeffer read Ps 13:1 as speaking to the immediate struggle he and so many other prisoners experienced—namely, how to define the experience of imprisonment in terms of time and meaning. His answer, also drawn from the prayers of the Psalms, employed a similar move in that he read Ps 31:15 as speaking to his own time and experience—“my times are in your hands.” Another example is seen in Bonhoeffer's response to the November 11, 1938 event called *Krystallnacht*, which involved “the burning of synagogues, the breaking of the windows of Jewish shops, and the brutalization of Jews all over Germany” by the Gestapo.²³ In reflecting on these tragic events, Bonhoeffer was drawn to Ps 74:8, which reads, “They have burned all the meeting places of God in the land.” As Kelly writes,

A little later Bonhoeffer incorporated his reactions to these destructive acts of racist hatred in his circular letter to the former seminarians now living their separate lives as pastors in small parishes. “During the past few days I have been thinking a great deal about Psalm 74, Zechariah 2:12 (2:8 ‘he who touches you touches the apple of his eye!’), Romans 9:4f. (Israel, to whom belongs the sonship, the glory, the covenant, the law, the service, the promises); Romans 11:11–15. That takes us right into prayer.”²⁴

Kelly then suggests that this was “a typical instance of how Bonhoeffer prayed the Psalms and meditated on them in a way that linked them to life.” These two situations exemplify how Bonhoeffer appeared to call for a type of interpretation of the Psalms which was connected to his own time as the best and most faithful way to read them. This characteristic he shared with Luther,²⁵ and is why I believe future study of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms might

²² Hendrix, “Luther Against the Backdrop,” 237.

²³ Kelly, “Introduction,” 148.

²⁴ Kelly, “Introduction,” 148.

²⁵ See Hendrix, “Luther Against the Backdrop,” 236–38.

benefit from this dissertation toward further study of the influence of Luther's interpretation of the Psalms on Bonhoeffer.

Conclusion

As I have sought to demonstrate and prove in this dissertation, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Psalms has much to add to the discussion and import of Bonhoeffer's theology, showing it to be worthy of this study and, in the future, even more sustained exploration. Through the content, analysis, and observations I have presented, I not only intend to make a significant donation to the gap that exists in this area of Bonhoeffer studies, but I also seek to provide a valuable contribution to the ongoing conversation of those concerned with and dedicated to the faithful exegesis and interpretation of the Psalms. I expect that none of what I have written here will be the final word on this topic, but trust, nonetheless, that it might be of service in the continued practice of reading, studying, and praying the Psalms: the prayerbook of Christ and the prayerbook of the church.

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