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## THE PSALTER TO THE THRESHOLD OF ETERNITY

**Abstract.** Following the example of Jesus Christ and Paul of Tarsus, the Church has adopted the Psalms as its privileged prayer book.

Some objections have been put forward against such poems because they belong to a given people, culture, and tradition. Thus author believes that something new is to be proposed and taught. First, the “I” of the author and the “I” of the community have to surrender to the “I” of the poem. Second, since the human being, created in God’s image and likeness, is placed at the centre of the universe, he can perform a cosmic liturgy in honour of God. In this way he becomes the representative of all humanity spread all over the world. Once he has collected all the voices of humanity he has to present them, as a pure sacrifice, to the heart of Christ.

**Key words:** Psalms; prayer; priesthood.

The book of Psalms does not belong to Israel any longer. It is a timeless book, which belongs to humanity as such. So André Chouraqui is right in saying that, “We are born with this book in our heart. A small book: 150 poems; 150 steps lifted up between death and life; 150 mirrors of our rebellions and our faithfulness, of our resurrections. More than a book it is a living being that speaks to you, that suffers, groans and dies, rises again and sings on the threshold of eternity. It seizes you and sweeps you away forever and ever, from the beginning to the end. It contains a mystery because every generation goes back to this song in order to purify itself in this spring, to question each verse, each word of the old prayer as if its rhythm would mark the pulse of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

It is true that we are born with this book in our heart; it is also true that the Psalms belong to a tradition of a given people—Israel—and it contains fixed formulas, which are totally different from our concerns. Far away from our own

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<sup>1</sup> André CHOURAQUI, *Les Psaumes* (Sinai, Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 1956), 1 (my translation).

concerns are certainly Moses, Aaron and his beard, Egypt and the Red Sea, Mount Hermon, Moab, Edom and Philistines. Expressions, images, truths that are typically the patrimony of the Near East and distinct from our Western world.

#### SOME OBJECTIONS FOR THE USE OF THE PSALTER AS A PRAYER BOOK

The first objection that has been put forward is that the Psalms as such, present a limited theological vision. In them there is no mention of the Holy Trinity, of the Incarnate Word, of the Church, of the sacraments. The Psalms belong to the Old Testament. Beside that, these poems belong to an old liturgy that has been replaced by the New Testament liturgy. The fat of the rams, the blood of the bulls: how could one recall such sacrifices without experiencing strange feelings?<sup>2</sup>

Another serious objection is offered by those poems, “which deal with God’s ‘vengeance’ or ‘anger’, the so-called ‘cursing psalms’ such as 58:6 ff; 137:8 ff”.<sup>3</sup> One example for all: “O daughter Babylon, you who are devastated. Happy shall they be who pay you back. What have you done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock” (Ps 137:8-9). Surely these expressions are hard and hurtful and so they give rise to rejection on the part of the Christians. Then how could we harmonize these expressions with Christ’s teaching about forgiveness and reconciliation? In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus reprimands James and John for asking him to bid fire from heaven on the Samaritans who refused to give him accommodation in their city. The present liturgical version of the Breviary has eliminated all the cursing verses. But “how can we consider a book of prayer that needs the scissors of censorship?”<sup>4</sup>

With regard to the limited theology of the Psalter, we have to keep in mind that the Psalms were not written to provide Israel with a theological treatise, though they exhibit various theological themes,<sup>5</sup> but to offer an inexhaustible source of sentiments and feelings with which to approach God,

<sup>2</sup> See Rémi LACK, *Mia forza e mio canto è il Signore. I salmi e i cantici di Lodi e Vespri* (Roma: Edizioni Paoline, 1981), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Dermot COX, *The Psalms in the Life of God’s People* (Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1984), 12.

<sup>4</sup> R. LACK, *Mia forza e mio canto è il Signore*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> For the theology of the Psalms see Hans-Joachim KRAUS, *Theology of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), where the author analyses a number of theological issues not forgetting also the liturgy of the Old Testament.

the Creator and Redeemer. The entire range of the Psalmist's feelings appears in the 150 psalms and like powerful rockets they go up to God in order to establish a friendly relationship with him. When we turn to God we are neither professors, nor experts, nor teachers, but poor human beings in need of help and salvation. Prayer demands a vibrant heart, stimulated by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us.

With regard to the "cursing psalms" we have to be aware that this type of psalms describes a situation of a devastating injustice with crude terms and violent images. Besides, injustice is part of every nation's history and not only Israel's. Evil celebrates its theophany in every part of the world. Confronted with a terrific situation of injustice, violence and oppression what should the Christian's reaction be? What was Jesus' reaction? Was he not terribly disturbed in his spirit in front of it, and did he not stigmatize it with prophetic words? He looked with scorn and said: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath to save life or to kill?" (Mk 3:4). Some of Jesus' statements are not dissimilar to some cursing phrases of the psalms. An example: "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence [...]. For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth [...]. You, snakes and brood of vipers" ( Mt 23:24.25.27.33).

What then should the Christian's attitude be? Certainly not to cut out those cursing verses in order to adapt the holy scripture for our modern sensitivity. First and foremost the Christian must pray for the coming of the kingdom of God: "Your kingdom come". This kingdom is not certainly the eschatological kingdom instead it is the ruling power of God here on earth. So the Christian prays so that God's justice may be established within each one's life.

When dealing with cursing expressions in the Psalter we have to distinguish between prayer and action. None of those expressions seeks to defend the use of violence, rather they are merely the desperate cry of an exploited humanity, addressed to God to obtain true justice. Injustice, violence and oppression are projected to God so that he may intervene to re-establish justice and eliminate violence and oppression and finally to teach us the right course of action. It may be that the real difficulty in praying this type of psalms lie in our Manichean concept of life, which divides reality with a clear cut between evil and good, good people and bad people. The prayer taught by the Lord instead exhorts us to implore deliverance from Evil-

Malice. It is most likely not an imploration against others, enemies, rather against those sick streaks of our mind, symbolized by the invisible serpent of the beginning that allured our mother Eve. The cursing sentences are an exorcising cry against the evil of all times, which afflicts each and every one of us, and which, if not cured, generates injustice, violence and oppression.

The Church has adopted the Psalter as its prayer book following the example of Paul of Tarsus. Paul exhorts his communities to pray unceasingly (1 Thess 5:17; Rom 12:12), just as he himself prays for his faithful “continually”, “night and day” (1 Thess 1:2; 3:10; 2 Thess 1:3.11). The Psalms and the canticles of the Bible were his prayer book (Acts 16:5).

At the threshold of the New Testament era, the Virgin Mary answers the angelic message with words taken from the Psalter. In her Magnificat, the song of Hannah, (Samuel’s mother, 1 Sam 2) and the Psalms 89; 98; 107; 111 are echoed. Like any other pious Jew, Jesus prayed with psalms in the synagogue. Saint Augustine states that he was “the singer of the psalms (*Christus cantor psalmorum*)”. The psalms were his prayer. In a special way the last hours of Jesus’ life are a kind of fulfilment of some psalms. At the end of Last Supper the words of the Hallel (113–118) sound very real on Jesus’ lips (*cf.* Mt 26:30): “I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the Lord’s name.” “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones.” “I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice” (Ps 116:13.15.17). And again: “I shall not die, but I shall live.” “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone.” “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps 118:17.22.24). In the Garden of Olives Jesus manifests his anguish by getting inspiration from the Psalms 42-43: “My soul is cast down within me...” (Mt 26:38; Mk 14:34; *cf.* John 12:27). On the cross in the supreme moment of his life, his ultimate cry is the Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34) and also Psalm 31:5: “Into your hand I commit my spirit” (Lk 23:46).

We have also to notice that Jesus Christ not only used and cited the psalms, but he also interpreted them with authority. His final instructions<sup>6</sup> to the apostles are undoubtedly fine lectures of exegesis: “Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Lk 24:44). Previously in order to show how far he was superior to David he cites psalm 110 (Mt 22:41-46): “If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” Addressing the members of the Sanhedrin, Jesus unites two citations

<sup>6</sup> See R. LACK, *Mia forza e mio canto è il Signore*, 9.

taken from Ps 110:1 and Dn 7:13: “You will see the son of man seated at right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mt 26:64).

So the decisive reason why the Psalter remains the prayer book for the Church lies in the fact that Jesus Christ made it his own prayer book. For the Church tradition the Psalms are the voice of a dialogue with God, divinely inspired: “The voice of the bride addressing her bridegroom”.<sup>7</sup> Better we can say that it is the voice of the Church addressing Christ and, through him, addressing the Father. The Psalms must be viewed as a special means by which the Eternal Father teaches his people to be open to a gift coming from above. They are the way for an authentic relation with him: “The words which came from God will be the steps to reach God [...]. If the Bible contains also a prayer book, this teaches us that God’s Word is not only that God speaks to us, but also that which he wants to hear from us, because it is the Word of the Son, who loves us. It is an extraordinary grace that God tells us how we can speak and communicate with him. This is permitted because we pray in the name of Christ Jesus. The Psalms are given so that we may learn how to pray in his name.”<sup>8</sup>

#### A CLASSIC APPROACH TO THE PSALMS

As far as I know, in all the Theological Centres the course on Psalms is offered in a classic way. Commendable are those centres that have a course on Psalms separated from Wisdom Literature. According to the common assumption a decent course on Psalms has to have a thorough presentation of the different literary genres. There is no doubt that such a presentation has its own intrinsic value.

In the history of biblical interpretation, the decisive event was the adoption of the form critical method, introduced by H. Gunkel in the scholarly work on the Psalms. Gunkel’s influence was really remarkable and consequently the study of the Psalms made consistent progress.<sup>9</sup>

The study of the literary forms was important and relevant for the

<sup>7</sup> VATICAN II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, No. 84.

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich BONHOEFFER, *Il libro di preghiera della Bibbia. Introduzione ai Salmi*, Opere, vol. 5 (Brescia: Queriniana, 1992), 100–101 (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> For the study of the literary genres see Hans-Joachim KRAUS, *Psalms 1-59. A Continental Commentary*, transl. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 38–42; Leopold SABBOURIN, *The Psalms. Their Origin and Meaning* (New York: Alba House, 1974), 29–33; Roland E. MURPHY, *The Gift of the Psalms* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000).

classification of the Psalms. The literary types “consist of literary units which draw from a common stock of words, formulas and images to express concepts and sentiments associated with one same situation [. . .]. The study of the literary forms of a psalm consists in investigating the inter-relation of its three constituting elements: content, setting in life and stylistic form”.<sup>10</sup>

According to H. Gunkel any literary work has its “setting in life”. By this phrase the German scholar meant the original situation in the life of the people in which the biblical literary form originated and was handed on and “each type of psalm had originally a specific function, and this function had to do with certain ceremonies of the temple cult. A psalm of thanksgiving, for instance, was presumably written to accompany a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Such a psalm did not reflect a specific situation, but was meant for use by any individual who wanted to offer a thanksgiving sacrifice. Since it was written to meet the needs of many, it reflected that which was typical situations in which a thanksgiving was offered”.<sup>11</sup>

On his part S. Mowinckel<sup>12</sup> contends that to understand a psalm one has to understand its liturgical setting. According to him the psalms were written to be used as formulae in private or collective liturgical celebrations. He lays a special emphasis on one central feast, the so-called “Feast of the enthronement of Yahweh”.<sup>13</sup> The architecture, which Mowinckel outlined, is extremely original, but the only problem is that such a festival was his own invention, in fact, unknown in the Jewish calendar.<sup>14</sup>

In relation to the “setting in life” of the psalms there emerges the question as to whether it was generally communal or individual. So there is a tension between cultic setting and private devotion. To solve such a polarity H. Gunkel appealed to evolution, which in his opinion modified the psalmic tradition. In other words, many genres of psalms broke free from their original setting, and “the now extant psalms were to be considered as later [mainly post-exilic] evolution, a free private poetry, unconnected with the cultic situation, but imitating the style and the motif of the older one”.<sup>15</sup> The problem for the historical reconstruction of the psalms is the “evolution”, which is a mere invention of Hermann Gunkel.<sup>16</sup> However there is no doubt

<sup>10</sup> L. SABOURIN, *The Psalms*, 29–30.

<sup>11</sup> Helmer RINGGREN, *The Faith of the Psalmist* (London: SCM Pr., 1963), XII.

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund MOWINCKEL, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship I-II* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 31–32.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Luis Alonso SCHÖKEL and Cecilia CARNITI, *I Salmi*, vol 1, Roma: Borla, 2007<sup>2</sup>), 67.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. L. SABOURIN, *The Psalms*, 36, quoting H. GUNKEL.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. L. ALONSO SCHOEKEL and C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, 65.

at all that he was a kind of watershed in the study of classification of the literary genres, his posthumous book, completed by Joachim Begrich,<sup>17</sup> is still a reference book for all the ensuing studies on the psalms.

As the years passed by, the method of classifying the literary genres has been perfected. At present the process of identifying different types of psalms is less rigid than before, and some sub-categories have been discovered. However, we must be very honest and acknowledge that half of the psalms contain a variety of genres within them. An example for all: in psalm 115(113A) there is a hymnic motif (v. 1), elements of supplication (v. 2), ironical-sapiential elements (vv. 4–7), curse (c. 8), profession of faith (vv. 3.9.11). This variety of types in one single psalm leads us to adopt a careful approach to the psalms. No one can question the value and the importance of the literary genres, but it must be kept in mind that the psalms are poetry and prayer and as such they do not tolerate a fixed pattern.<sup>18</sup> We have also to bear in mind that “the historical-critical method does not exhaust the meaning of a text, which in fact acquires new meanings as it is passed from generation to generation.”<sup>19</sup>

As already mentioned, very often the study of the Psalms is included in the course on Wisdom Literature, and there it is given less attention than the wisdom books. Where the Psalms are studied as a proper course, usually the teachers present them according to the classical way, in that they offer selected poems from each and every literary genre. In my humble opinion, this way is only useful for the students to get a mark for their academic studies, but it does not help them to pray the Psalms. The Psalms, as already stated, are both poetry and prayer and so they must be treated as such. A purely academic approach to the beauty and richness of the Psalter could end up being a real waste of time. A new approach has to be looked for which may help the students to use them as the real prayer of the Church.

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<sup>17</sup> Hermann GUNKEL, *An Introduction to the Psalms. The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, completed by Joachim Begrich, trans. James D. Nogalski, Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. L. ALONSO SCHOEKEL and C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> R.E. MURPHY, *The Gift of the Psalms*, 9.

## THE "I" OF THE AUTHOR AND THE "I" OF THE PSALM

It is a well-known fact that in many of the Psalms the author presents himself in the first person, "I". Some exegetes interpret the author's "I" collectively, in the sense that the Psalmist speaks on behalf of the whole praying community, expressing a real attitude or experience. Others, instead, think that the Psalmist speaks on his own behalf as an individual describing what has marked his own daily life. Both positions are legitimate if they are interpreted in the light of literary analysis.

We find a good example of an "I" that speaks on behalf of the community in Psalm 118, where the whole community expresses itself through its leader who represents it. Psalm 92 is the same, where an old king speaks on behalf of the community. Also in Psalm 18 the psalmist king inserts personal and collective elements.

In other Psalms the "I" seems to indicate the person of the Psalmist. The Psalmist's personal drama becomes the object of prayer if he feels he is a sinner (Ps 25; 51; 130), or sick (Ps 88), or the victim of some injustice (Ps 4; 17; 22; 31; 54; 69; 143) or if he is an exile (Ps 42; 43). When the Lord grants his prayer, then his song becomes a hymn of thanksgiving, either for some healing (Ps 41: 30) or for a sin that has been forgiven (Ps 32) or for some justice obtained (Ps 116), or because he has been freed from some misfortune (Ps 34; 63; 66; 138).

But it must be noted that when it is a question of the author's "I" there is always some relationship with the liturgical community as a whole, in that his personal experience is situated within the context of the religious experience of the people (Ps 25; 37; 69; 143). The same thing is seen when the subject-matter of the Psalm presupposes an increase of liturgical, thus public and community, graces (Ps 22; 42; 43; 51; 54).

Nevertheless, we are also convinced that a precise identification of the author's or the community's "I" is of limited value for a fruitful and meaningful prayer, since it always remains on the level of the "setting in life" (*Sitz im Leben*). In this case a historical transmigration would always be needed in order to arrive at the time of the original composition and experience. But we must bear in mind that "in poetry what the author really feels does not count, but it is his expression that remains valid: valid and effective mainly for the reader who makes it his own."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> L. ALONSO SCHOEKEL and C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, 82 (my translation)

The author's "I" and the community's "I" must surrender to the "I" of the poem. In this way the Psalm becomes a precise and free individuality to be possessed, and it releases its eternal richness. This is possible only when it is not subjected to a process of classification. The Psalm is a clear source waiting for someone willing to take possession of it. The author's "I" and that of the community leave space for the "I" of the person praying who becomes one with the "I" of the poem. In this way the original meaning ceases to exist and one that is valid for the situation of the person who assumes it and offers it to God as his prayer develops. It follows that "the author of the Psalms sacrifices himself, he withdraws and leaves the scene, so that others who come, perhaps anonymously and far from his time, may take possession of his verses and may say in them "I", with a real sense of identification and not with the pretence of the dramatic actor."<sup>21</sup>

At this level the psalms have become "timeless" and belong only to the one who adopts them as his/her own prayer. The real author of the poems has given way to all those generations of people who have been using them. In the process of appropriation to oneself one "does not identify himself with another, but he consigns himself to the poem. The words of the psalm become his and he is totally subject to them. Without fiction and fictitious representation, the believer re-lives a vicarious experience, mediated by the psalm and expressed by means of the words of the same psalm."<sup>22</sup>

#### MAN THE SUBJECT OF PRAYER

The book of Psalms is usually listed among wisdom books, though only a few poems can be considered as wisdom psalms. The place assigned to this book, however, is not at all awkward since one of the protagonists of these poems is man as a man in relation to God. In reading these poems one immediately realizes how the one who is praying seems to be in touch with the Divinity. His address is personal and immediate. There is a genuine "I-Thou" relationship. On the part of the believer "the utterance of 'You' is to take a sabbatical from our arrogance, self-sufficiency, and autonomy, our pride, fatigue, and despair. We become aware that life is constituted for us but is not created by us; and we know the name of the one who constitutes

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<sup>21</sup> L. ALONSO SCHOEKEL-C.CARNITI, *I Salmi*, 82 (my translation)

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 86 (my translation)

life for us.”<sup>23</sup> Together with Israel we are convinced that “this ‘You’ is not an escape to which one flees, but is one to whom appeal is made out beyond all conventional hope and conventional control.”<sup>24</sup> It also seems that all of a sudden God comes out of the words uttered by the psalmist. So there is no doubt that “psalms are the believer’s speech to God”.<sup>25</sup> The role played by man in the psalms justifies the insertion of the Psalter among wisdom books. We know that in Wisdom Literature the central point is man as a man, looking for “self-understanding in terms of relationships with things, people and the Creator.”<sup>26</sup> The importance and dignity of man as a man was already outlined in the two creation accounts, especially in the Priestly account.

Let us now look briefly the main characteristics of these two creation accounts, in order to see the specific role assigned by God to man. In the Yahwistic creation account (Gen 2:4b–25) God appears as one preparing a lively setting for human beings. It is God who takes the newly created man and “places him in the Garden of Eden as its gardner to tend and care for it” (Gen 2:15). The newly created human being becomes the object of God’s address, the recipient of his words, the “Thou” of God: “You may freely eat of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it, you shall die” (Gen 2:16–17). Thus in this account man is the mid-point around which everything revolves. And this is the reason why God himself makes all the created animals parade in front of Adam to be given a name (*cf.* Gen 2:19–20). “By naming the animals the man opens up, determines and orders his world and incorporates its components into his life. The world becomes human only through language.”<sup>27</sup>

However, man does not find any suitable helper among those creatures, which parade in front of him. He needs a helper “like him”, that is endowed with the capacity to understand, to speak, to dialogue with. He needs one into whom has been breathed the breath of life, and who is a living creature like him (*cf.* Gen 2:7). That helper was granted to him. According to the Yahwistic creation account man, though tragically ephemeral because creat-

<sup>23</sup> Walter BRUEGGEMANN, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 35–36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

<sup>25</sup> Terry MUCK, *Psalm, Bhajan, and Kirtan: Songs of the Soul in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Stephen Breck Reid (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>26</sup> James L. CRENSHAW, *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (New York: KTAV Publishing House 1976), 484.

<sup>27</sup> Claus WESTERMANN, *Genesis 1-11. A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 228–229.

ed from dust, is great and wonderful since he has the power of naming the animals and ultimately is capable of dialogue and love.<sup>28</sup>

More to the point for our purpose, is the Priestly creation account (Gen 1:1-2:4a), where man is the crown of God's creative activity. The editor of this biblical tradition was a Levite, and, being responsible for worship in Israel, he structures his story with an accurate liturgical orientation.

The image that clearly describes his intention is that of a pyramid. Creation is carried out over a period of six days. It begins with the creation of light and the consequent separation of the light from the darkness on the first day, then in succession, day after day, there follows the separation of the waters above the vault from the waters under the vault; the creation of the plants; the heavenly bodies; the animals. One creative act after another, which aims at the wonderful construction of a pyramid on whose summit is placed God's final creative act, man, created with sublime dignity, because he is made in the image and likeness of the Creator himself (Gen 1:26).

In this conception the whole universe emerges as an immense Temple. Thus all creation leans towards man who must gather all the voices of the universe to direct them, like the greatest orchestral conductor, towards the Creator. He gathers the song of creation and harmonizes it like an immense symphony addressed to God. This is not a liturgical or exegetical fantasy, but a profound reality proved by Scripture itself. A wonderful example is found in the Song of the three young men in the prophet Daniel, where man expresses in an audible voice his reply to the Creator of the inanimate world:

Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord,  
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.  
Bless the Lord, you heavens,  
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.  
Bless the Lord, all you waters above the heavens,  
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.  
Bless the Lord, all that grows in the ground,  
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.  
Bless the Lord, whales and all that swim in the waters,  
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.  
Bless the Lord, all birds of the air,  
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.  
Bless the Lord, all wild animals and cattle,  
sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.  
(3:57-58.60, 76, 79-81)

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Antonio MAGNANTE, *Why Suffering? The Mystery of Suffering in the Bible* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997), 27-29.

The structural subdivision, with the fixed refrain “sing praise and highly exalt him forever” is extremely clear. The president of the assembly names the works of creation in a rhythmic cadence, and the liturgical assembly raises its voice in a cosmic hymn of thanksgiving to the Lord. This priestly function of man is also confirmed by the Yahwistic tradition that presents the same God who brings all the wild animals and all the birds of heaven to man (*cf.* Gen. 2:19) so that he may give them a name and thus give them a specific individuality. So man is the one who gives a name to creation and who is made lord of creation. Psalm 8 takes up this wonderful theological truth of the greatness of man again:

Yet you have made him little less than Elohim,  
and have crowned him with glory and beauty,  
made him lord of the works of your hands,  
put all things under his feet,  
sheep and cattle, all of them,  
and even the wild beasts,  
birds in the sky, fish in the sea,  
when he makes his way across the ocean.”

(vv. 5-9)

We might ask how the birds and the fish of the sea can be put under man’s feet if not within the dimension of dominion over all creatures, so that it may be directed towards the one true Lordship of God in terms of perennial praise which, starting from creation, reaches his throne. Man is the conductor of this cosmic symphony. So it does not matter which field or which ocean is mentioned, what matters is that everything, with no exclusions, participates in the hymn of praise for the Creator.

In the light of such anthropological theology the recital of the Psalms as prayer should be arranged differently and should no longer be so concerned with the literary forms and the relative setting in life, which produced them. The Psalms must be proclaimed and that is all, proclaimed by all sons and daughters of the Most High.

As we have already mentioned, within the Psalter a number of literary genres have been identified. Any classification finds its origin in the already quoted work of H. Gunkel. Many interpreters<sup>29</sup> have attempted to make his

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<sup>29</sup> L. SABOURIN, *The Psalms*, 444–445; G. FORER, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1970), 285–293; H.J. KRAUS, *Psalms 1-59*, 38–62; Eduard LIPINSKI, “Psaumes,” in *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, Supplément, fasc. 48, 1-123 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1943).

classification more accurate. Here we mention the proposal of H. Gunkel, who distinguished and described three main types and a few lesser kinds of psalms.

Main genres

Hymns Songs of Zion; Enthronement songs

Laments Individual laments

Laments of the Community

Individual song of trust

Community songs of trust

Thanksgiving Prayers

Individual thanksgiving

Thanksgiving songs of Israel

Lesser types

Royal psalms

Wisdom psalms

Liturgies

Mixed poems

Prophetic psalms

Legends

Pilgrimage songs

Curses

We are not at all interested in judging whether H. Gunkel's classification was coherent with the criteria mentioned above. We are only interested in pointing out that the man on top of the pyramid is not only collecting the voices of praise and thanksgiving to be addressed to God. A great variety of voices blossoms from the heart of humanity. He has to collect all of them and make them become prayer.

We are quite sure that those who use the psalms as their prayer are not able to operate an accurate classification on the spot. We have to look for a method, easy and accessible to all, that enables the prayer to use them as invaluable means. The psalms take us to the threshold of eternity and so we cannot overlook them.

## HOW TO PRAY THE PSALMS

The real key for using the Psalms fruitfully as a prayer is given by St. Augustine: “If the text is prayer, pray; if it is lamentation, lament; if it is gratitude, be joyful; if it is a text of hope, hope; if it expresses fear be afraid: because the things you feel in your head are the mirror of yourselves.”<sup>30</sup> Augustine’s suggestion is not a form of scientific research, but an exhortation for us to abandon ourselves totally to the psalms. We must let ourselves be seized by the rhythm beaten out by the feelings, which the poems generate in us. No longer literary forms, but those feelings have to guide our prayer.

The prayer’s mind and heart must welcome with gratitude all the stimuli that come from the words of the poems and must gather what the psalm carries with it. We have to become only the resonance chamber of the psalm’s expression. They convey the sum total of the joys and sorrows of many generations that have followed one after the other over the millennia. They finally come to rest in the person of the One Awaited, in the One who makes all things new, namely in Jesus Christ, the real worshipper of the new creation. Whatever they may contain and express finds its final fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Following Augustine’s suggestion we must adopt an attitude of prayer to establish empathy between the Psalm and ourselves. We must present ourselves for prayer as receptive and impressionable subjects, like a powerful magnet that does not reject anything that enters into its magnetic field. The person praying is at the service of the word, which must be re-addressed towards the centre from which it came. Being inspired the words of the psalms emanated from God through the Spirit, and now they, through ourselves, return to God in the form of a prayer, sometimes of praise, sometimes of supplication, sometimes of lament, sometimes of despair. We stand in front of God not empty handed, but full of the inspired word. We are only mere instruments to let the words of the psalms go back to the fountain from which they were sent.

We must only unite ourselves with the Psalm, and never forget that we are at the service of the Kingdom of God. Imposing our sentiments and humours on prayer would be like “reproaching” Jesus because he is going up to Jerusalem to be crucified as Peter dared to do, branded on that occasion as “Satan” (*cf.* Mk 8:32–33). This is a temptation that recurs far too often and

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<sup>30</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 33, PL 36.

which must be overcome because it makes us run the risk of making our prayer restricted to our own personal needs.

If this principle is fundamental and essential for a spiritual exercise, then the Psalter, understood as a prayer and not the object of scientific research, should be used for the powerful theological-spiritual vitality it contains. All the vitality is to be addressed to God, who worked wondrous acts, which are of two types. "First these acts are God's historical interventions whereby this covenanted community of promise comes to exist. [...] Israel recites its memory of how it came to be, a gift from the sovereign You. Second, Yahweh governs the world, creation, to bring light out of darkness, life out of chaos, and food in the face of hunger. [...] These two themes, Israel's miraculous life, and creation's miraculous function, together constitute God's wondrous deeds."<sup>31</sup> To this provident and majestic God prayer must be addressed.

The dynamics of the Psalter reflect human life in its entire vicissitudes. In the light of all this, for fruitful prayer, we must consider the sentiments that the Psalm arouses in us. They are easily identifiable and, since they are integral part of humanity, they are universal and easy to absorb. The man of the Psalms is ordinary man, without distinctions of race or colour, of language and culture, without latitude or longitude. The heart-rending cry of a child who suffers in the far north of the world expresses the same suffering as the one that cries in the extreme south.

The events that followed one another on the stage of history and appear in the setting of creation produce a myriad of human sentiments.<sup>32</sup> With arms outstretched and hand uplifted before the wonders performed by God and before the greatness of creation, man does not remain indifferent. Being on top of the cosmic pyramid he is a man "in between," a kind of mediator between God and the entire cosmos.

The Psalmist misses nothing of what happens and he directs everything to the quest for the divine "Thou." So more than any other prayer, the Psalter is an impassioned dialogue, the meeting of two individuals, a continual face to face. Through the Psalms we do not pray to someone who is not there, to some sleeping stranger, but to a God who is present in history and resplendent in creation, but above all a God passionately in love with human beings a God who always wants his creature's salvation.

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<sup>31</sup> W. BRUEGGEMANN, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. L. ALONSO SCHOEKEL and C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, 73–80

A prayer that is carried out through human sentiments is perhaps the most human prayer because it involves the whole person in his or her totality. Sentiments require participation, involvement, but above all they require that our rationality should leave room for our affectivity. Let us not forget that Christ wept when he saw the holy city just as he wept before the tomb of his friend Lazarus (*cf.* Lk 19:41; Jn 11:35)

The approach that is proposed here for the prayer of the Psalms is neither based on the classification of the various literary genres of the Psalms nor on the “setting in life” that produced them. But we propose to be in tune with the spontaneous overflowing of human sentiments, which the Psalm brings to the surface. All the Psalms are an inexhaustible source of human sentiments. There are sentiments of praise, thanksgiving, trust, tenderness, joy, love or hate, desire or indifference, anger or meekness, sadness or gaiety, compassion or cruelty, envy or admiration, pain and atrocious sufferings, hope or despair, blessings or curses, fear or courage, gratitude. And many others, according to the subject matter of the Psalm one is praying. They constitute the voice of all humanity. Through them our soul gathers all of them and “slowly the soul of the Psalmist becomes our soul, his battle our battle, his joy our joy, his pain our pain, his agony our agony”,<sup>33</sup> and so on, in an eternal rhythm within the generations that have been and that are to come.

By nature, these sentiments are universal and do not belong either to the Psalmist, or to the psalms, or to us. They are the sentiments of man as such and they must be prayed in this light. The person who prays is merely the resonance chamber for all mankind’s feelings. From the peak of the cosmic pyramid he gives voice to them so that they may reach the Father in the form of prayer.

This approach has a missionary dimension. A missionary can never be an isolated voice before God. He is the resonance chamber of the heart of the peoples. Through the inspired Word, he gathers their feelings and sentiments and addresses them to God. He is the voice of humanity spread all over the world. No prayer is more missionary than the Psalter.

St. Augustine gives us a wonderful example of how the voice that resonates in the Psalms is a voice coming from the entire cosmos. Commenting on Psalm 60 (61) Augustine says: “Since we are members of Christ and inserted in his Body, as he asked us to believe, in this Psalm we have to hear our own voices, and not a strange voice. Not only the voice of

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<sup>33</sup> A. CHOURAQUI, *Les Psaumes*, Introduction 13 (my translation)

us who are physically present here, but also that of all of us who are on the face of the earth, from the East to the West. And in order that you may understand that it is our voice, the Psalmist speaks here as one man. But it is not true: it is the unity of the Church that speaks through the mouth of one person. But in Christ, we all are one man, whose head is in heaven, whose members are yet toiling on earth: and because they are toiling see what he says: 'Hear, my cry, o God, listen to my prayer' (v. 1). Who is speaking? He, as if One. But see whether He is one as he says: 'From all the ends of the earth I cried to you in the anguish of my heart'. Well then, is it no longer one? But of course! It is surely One, because Christ is One, of whom all we are members. What individual man calls out from the ends of the earth? The only one who calls from the ends of the earth is that heritage, about which it was said to God the Son: 'Demand of me, and I will give to you the nations for your inheritance, and for your possession the boundaries of the earth' (Ps 2:8). It follows that it is this, Christ's possession and heritage and body and one Church, this unity which we are, which cries from the ends of the earth. What is its cry? As I said above, its cry is: 'Hear my cry, o God, listen to my prayer; from the ends of the earth I called to you'. This means that these words express my cry to you and the expression 'from the ends of the earth' means that it comes from every quarter of the world."<sup>34</sup>

In any corner of the world there could be people who are crying for help, who are lamenting, who are suffering, who are exploited, or are rejoicing and full of gratitude for what they have received. All those people's voices may become a powerful prayer to be addressed to God. In this way liturgical prayer of the Breviary becomes a cosmic prayer and a tremendous chorus that God cannot but hear.

#### A CHRISTIAN PRAYER

In the Old Testament Israel had a great veneration for the sacred name, YHWH, and used to replace it with another term, ADONAI. This attitude "derives from a profound sense of divine, of awe at who God is. The unutterability, the 'unsayability', of God's name, the divine transcendence, is the basis of any faith in Christ."<sup>35</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer is right in saying that: "It is only when one knows the unutterability of the name of God that

<sup>34</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Ps 61.

<sup>35</sup> R.E. MURPHY, *The Gift of the Psalms*, 31.

one can utter the name of Jesus; it is only when one loves life and the earth that one can believe in the resurrection and a new world.”<sup>36</sup> It is Christ who takes us beyond the unutterability and unsayability of God, giving us access to him (*cf.* Heb 12:22). He is the genuine way to him (*cf.* Jn 14:6). And he was also the only one capable of realizing personally the perfect and existential cult (*cf.* Heb 9:14). So any prayer can be effective and efficacious if it is made through Jesus Christ, since he is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5-6; *cf.* Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Some biblical passages will support this idea:

- 1 Pt 2:5: It is clear in saying that all the sacrifices offered are “by Jesus Christ”  
 Rom 5:1 “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”  
 Eph 2:18 “Through him we have... access to the Father”  
 Eph 3:12 “In whom (Jesus Christ) we have access to God”  
 Eph 2:5–6 God “made us alive with Christ... and raised us up with him... in Christ”.  
 Heb 7:25 Christians are “those who approach God through him”  
 Heb 10:19 All have to approach God, but “by the blood of Christ”  
 Heb 13:21 Called “to do his will”, but “through Jesus Christ”  
 Heb 13:15 Since they have received everything through Christ, they are continually to offer “through him” “a sacrifice of praise”

On the basis of what we have outlined above, for a Christian the possibility of addressing God in prayer does not exist without Christ’s mediation. The one who is collecting the feelings and sentiments of all humanity from the psalms that he is reciting, becomes the sacrament of Christ’s mediation.<sup>37</sup> Through this function he enables every human being to unite his/her own existence to Christ’s existence. In this way Christ’s role as intercessor with the Father will be perpetuated forever.

Christian prayer in general, and so even that of the Psalter, is rooted in the conviction that Jesus Christ is divine, that he is the only mediator and that he is an efficacious intercessor with the Father. So we dare to risk everything on this known named Jesus Christ. “How daring, precarious, defiant, and scandalous is the act of prayer”, says Walter Brueggemann.<sup>38</sup> When we pray we risk everything on a person, named Jesus Christ, who is the subject matter of many discussions about his historical identity and divinity. In the world of ideology Christ’s cross as means of salvation is

<sup>36</sup> Dietrich BONHOEFFER, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 86.

<sup>37</sup> *Cf.* Albert VANHOYE, “Sacerdoce commun and sacerdoce ministériel. Distinction et Rapports,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 97(1975): 193–207, here 200–201.

<sup>38</sup> W. BRUEGGEMANN, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 65

deemed to be foolish and unsustainable. But for Paul of Tarsus and those who have faith, that foolishness is the power and the wisdom of God (*cf.* 1 Cor 1:23–24). If we believe that, we can be confident that the power of God will be manifested forever and ever through a prayer made through Jesus Christ, who accepted the foolishness of the cross.

### CONCLUSION

Following the example of Jesus Christ and Paul of Tarsus, the Church has adopted the Psalms as its privileged prayer book. A moral obligation is imposed upon Deacons and Priests to recite the Breviary daily, the Breviary which contains, among other texts, psalms and canticles.

Some objections have been put forward against such poems because they belong to a given people, culture, and tradition. All eventual objections can be overcome for the simple reason that Jesus himself used them. But this answer seems to be not enough, because these poems remain difficult to understand, and very aloof from our modern culture. The same classical way to study the psalms by classifying them according to various literary genres is not very helpful. I wonder whether in a simple reading of them one is able to understand which literary form that given psalm belongs to, and what was the “setting in life” that produced it.

Thus we believe that something new is to be proposed and taught. First, we suggested that the “I” of the author and the “I” of the community have to surrender to the “I” of the poem, so that the “I” of the poem may become one with the “I” of the one who is praying. Second, since the human being, created in God’s image and likeness, is placed at the centre of the universe, he can perform a cosmic liturgy in honour of God. He is summoned to gather up all the feelings and sentiments which emerge from the psalms he is reciting. In this way he becomes the representative of all humanity spread all over the world. He has to become the resonance chamber of his own brothers and sisters. Once he has collected all the voices of humanity he has to present them, as a pure sacrifice, to the heart of Christ, because any prayer becomes effective and efficacious if it is performed through Christ our Lord.

All those, deacons, priests, Religious, lay people – who are thousands and thousands—who use the psalms daily as the prayer of the Church, are the sacrament of Christ’s mediation. In the end this is the celebration of the common priesthood.

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## PSAŁTERZ DO PROGU WIECZNOŚCI

## Streszczenie

Kościół, idąc za przykładem Jezusa z Nazaretu i wskazówkami Pawła z Tarsu, szczególnie wyróżnił Psalterz jako materiał modlitewny, mimo że niektóre psalmy wzbudzają kontrowersje, gdyż przynależą one do specyficznego kręgu kulturowego. Wychodząc naprzeciw powyższym zastrzeżeniom, autor proponuje, aby podczas używania modlitwy z psalmami zastąpić jaźń autora jaźnią utworu. Po drugie, poprzez modlitwę psalmami możliwe jest uwielbienie dzieła stworzenia. Modlący reprezentuje stworzenie i poddaje je jako ofiarę dla Serca Chrystusowego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** psalmy; modlitwa; kapłaństwo.