Not the Same, Not the Other in the Same Way as Any Other: Praying the Psalms and the Jewish-Christian Relationship

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The book of Psalms has provided texts for Christian praise and prayer, public worship and personal meditation, throughout the history of the church.[1] The way it has been used has varied over the centuries. In particular, the extent to which a commitment to praying through the psalter in its entirety has been a cardinal feature of spirituality for Christians has not remained altogether constant. Contemporary scholarship suggests it was the fourth-century monks who introduced it,[2]and arguably it was then in some churches of the Protestant Reformation, not least the Church of England, that this originally monastic model came closest to forming the faith of all believers.[3]

Since the 19th century, the psalter has been eclipsed in the experience of many Protestant and Anglican Christians, for reasons that would include the rather different spiritual focus of revivalist forms of Protestantism and the unease generated by modern biblical studies around the kind of appropriation of scriptural texts required for this spiritual practice. At the same time, attempts inspired by the Liturgical Movement in Roman Catholic and other contexts to reinvigorate the daily office, with its extensive diet of psalmody, for the whole people of God have not been wholly successful. Nonetheless, psalms retain a regular place in the public, liturgical life of many Christian traditions, being prayerfully recited day by day by communities and by individual Christians and featuring prominently in acts of worship on Sundays and festivals. They are constantly quoted and paraphrased in hymns and songs from all periods, including the present day. Individual Christians turn to the Book of Psalms to find words with which to speak to God in their deepest distress and their highest joy.

Where Christians are aware of Judaism as a living form of faith, they are bound to become conscious that Jews, like them, address God through these same texts.[4] Judaism also gives a central place to the psalms in its liturgical traditions. Judaism also fosters the praying of the psalms by believers in their particular personal circumstances. The use of the psalms to speak to God is a deep-seated aspect of both faiths, so deep-seated that neither could relinquish it entirely without cutting itself off from the normative sources for its current identity and self-understanding. Of course, the shared spiritual practice of praying the psalms is bound up with the overlapping but not identical scriptural canon of Christianity and Judaism. Yet as Athanasius argued in the 4th century, part of the uniqueness of the Book of Psalms within the Bible is that these are not just words from God to us, words to be listened to and heeded, but words from God to us for us to speak back to God.[5] Christians and Jews therefore have a shared stock of texts on which they draw when they seek to respond to the divine. Moreover, those texts provide them with a common vocabulary of prayer and praise.

That is one reason why there may be something that jars for Christians when Judaism is spoken of as one among many “other” religions. There is simply no parallel for this level of shared spiritual practice, extending to the use of the same texts for the same central purpose, with another religion. How can Judaism be just one among many others when there is this common ground at the heart

of what we do and who we are?

At the same time, Christians who become aware of Judaism as a living faith community that shares in the use of the psalms to express its praises and prayers are also likely to realize that neither is it simply the "same." If the psalms have a central place within the historic liturgical traditions of both religions, that place remains located alongside other texts – and those other texts are, for the most part, not shared, and in many cases not capable of being shared, because they are bound up with the differences between the two religions. Yet at the same time, neither can Judaism be easily categorized with the "other" forms of religion that Christianity encounters at the far side of its own borders, because Judaism appears both inside them and beyond them:[6] speaking the same prayers and the same praises, even while asserting different and at times contradictory things.

Now, it is of course entirely proper at this point to observe that shared words are not the same as shared meanings, and it is clear enough that Christians and Jews have some different horizons for meaning in reading and praying the psalms. Given, however, that the most fundamental dimension of meaning here is that of address to God, then the only way to deny any common horizon of meaning at all when Christians and Jews pray the psalms is to deny that they are both addressing the same God. Because of the commitment of both Christianity and Judaism to belief in one God, such a denial can only be expressed by claiming that while one of these faiths in speaking the psalms is addressing the true God, the other is merely casting words at an idol, a demon or a fiction. Such assertions are not without precedent over two millennia of polemical exchanges.[7] All major Western Christian churches, however, have made formal statements since the Second World War and the Holocaust that flatly contradict any assertion of this kind.[8] Christian doctrine, therefore, is that Jews and Christians alike in saying these words worship the one God of Israel and make intercession to the one God of Israel. Therefore they cannot each be doing something completely unrelated to the other in this shared practice of psalm reading, which is so central for them both.

Furthermore, the practice depends on the belief that the words we are saying speak truth about who we are before God, as well as speaking truth about who God is for us. That is, by using the psalms in this way we are saying something about the relationship between the persons praying them and the one to whom the prayers are directed. Most obviously, we are claiming a continuity between the first person pronouns of the psalms and ourselves, a continuity sufficiently strong that we can inhabit the "I" and "we" of the texts: we are affirming there is a theological identity here that permits an act of hermeneutical identification. Moreover, that act of identification then implies a commitment to finding ways to relate the world of the text to our own world. Israel, Jacob, Benjamin, Ephraim, Manasseh – we, too, own these names as our names. Jerusalem, Zion, the temple, the law, the reign of God, the deliverance of the poor – we, too, make these the subjects of our speech, the objects of our longing.

For Christian theology, such identification can only proceed from prior identification with Jesus Christ.[9] We are in him, our life is found in union with him, and we recognize him as the Word in all the words of Scripture; therefore we can inhabit the text of the psalms and the world that they open up for us. The act of hermeneutical identification in praying and praising with the psalms in Judaism clearly does not proceed from the same basis but has quite different roots. This does not imply, however, that Christians are bound to regard it as mistaken and to deny any distinctive relationship between the Jewish community speaking the psalms and the realities named in the text. Some forms of Christian belief have done this: supersessionism (to use the standard shorthand here) in both its "conservative" and "liberal" forms, where "conservative" describes a position where those realities now refer exclusively to the church and "liberal" one where they now only have a universal meaning that in principle extends beyond any particular religious tradition. Yet all such forms of belief are contradicted by Romans 9:4: "For they are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises."

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Christians, therefore, should be able to recognize the “worship” that is God’s gracious gift in the Jewish practice of speaking praise and prayer to God in the psalms, even as they acknowledge that the meanings given to the words in the context of this shared practice will be in many cases divergent, because the conscious orientation to the mystery of Christ that shapes the dynamics of Christian spirituality is inevitably absent. That is, they will recognize Jews as a religious community other than themselves, yet using the same God-given words to address the same God who gave them to us; inhabiting with Christians the fullness of the meaning of those words, and yet contesting their account of how that fullness should be described. Not the same, therefore, and not other in the same way as any other. That is the uniqueness of the relationship to Judaism for Christianity. One could start from other places, with other practices and other themes, to sketch it out, but the shared practice of praying the psalms shows up the decisive parameters here well enough.

None of this implies anything directly about the relationship of Judaism to Christianity. The relationship between the two religions is not straightforwardly symmetrical (human relationships rarely, if ever, are), and there is no reason to think that the phenomenon of shared practice with regard to the psalter should be interpreted in a symmetrical way. Nonetheless, for Judaism, too, the uniqueness of this sharing could perhaps also prompt reflection about the particularity of its relation to Christianity, and how it might most truthfully be described.

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[1] For overviews of this subject, see for instance William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, with Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010).

[2] So Paul F. Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (London: SPCK), 117-31.

[3] George Guiver, *Company of Voices: Daily Prayer and the People of God* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1988), 115-25.

[4] Susan Gillingham, in *Psalms through the Centuries*, Vol. 1, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Chichester: Wiley–Blackwell, 2012), weaves together the history of the psalms in Judaism and Christianity.

[5] Athanasius, Letter to Marcellinus 11, in *The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980), 109-11.

[6] I attempted to articulate this way of understanding Christianity’s relationship with Judaism, which might be traced back to Franz Rosenzweig, in *The Internal Foe: Judaism and Anti-Judaism in the Shaping of Christian Theology* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

[7] E.g. Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 317-63; David Ellenson, “A Jewish View of the Christian God: Some Cautionary and Hopeful Remarks,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, (eds.) Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Samuel and Michael A. Signer (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press), 69-76.

[8] See the documents assembled Franklin Sherman, (ed.), *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue,* Vol. 1, The Road to Reconciliation (1945-1985) (New York: Paulist Press, 2011).

[9] Jeremy Worthen, “Praying the Psalms in the Name of Christ: Christian-Jewish Relations since Vatican II and a Pre-Modern Spiritual Tradition,” in *Interpreting the ‘Spirit of Assisi’: Challenges to Interfaith Dialogue in a Pluralistic World* (eds.) Maria Diemling and Thomas J. Herbst (Canterbury: FISC, 2013), 235-51.

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