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Who Speaks and Who Hears?

First, Second and Third Persons in Psalm Interpretation

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The Harp of Prophecy¹ is a richly rewarding collection, not only because of the immense depth and breadth of scholarship displayed in its presentation of the early Christian sources, but also, as several of the endorsements on the cover already make clear, because that scholarship is deployed in such a way as to provoke reflection on the nature of biblical reading and interpretation, and in particular on what is going on when ancient words are spoken in with and for contemporary communities that read them as scripture.

As the essays in this collection demonstrate, the Psalms are particularly well suited as the focus for such an exploration, and the patristic exegetes recognised and indeed assumed this. One of the most arresting ideas in the early Christian exegesis of the Psalms, discussed in the introduction to *The Harp of Prophecy* and approached from different perspectives in several of the essays, is the idea that the Psalms are distinctive not because of their semantic context but because of their grammatical form. Specifically, the feature of the Psalms that

¹ *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms* edited by Brian E. Daley, S.J., and Paul R. Kolbet (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), xvi + 332 pp.

demands interpretation is their indexicality – beginning from the fact that they are often phrased as first-person speech. ‘Who speaks the Psalms?’ has an urgency about it as a question that other biblical books do not, because so much of the interpretation depends on who is saying it.

There is an obvious response to “Who speaks the Psalms?” – obvious for the interpreters studied in *The Harp of Prophecy* at least. The Psalms are spoken in worship every day. Psalm interpretation – as is frequently discussed in *The Harp of Prophecy* – originates not from hearing or reading the first-person speech but primarily from voicing the first-person speech. We might hypothesise, then, that the interpretive text, the commentary or the spiritual manual, comes from ‘hearing oneself speak’ the psalms. To use very anachronistic terminology – which is probably unavoidable when the twenty-first century tries to listen to the early Christian centuries – we might suggest that psalm interpretation is a matter of becoming ‘self-conscious’ at the point where the self is being refigured and re-voiced through the psalm text.

Locating psalm interpretation in this space of “hearing oneself speak” helps to explain its specific existential as well as intellectual urgency. I was frequently reminded when reading *The Harp of Prophecy* of a much later writer, the Puritan and later Quaker William Dewsbury, describing his spiritual torments as a young man at a time of immense social and ecclesial disruption in seventeenth-century England:

Then I durst join no more with the world in ... singing David's conditions, which they called singing psalms. For the light in my conscience let me see the evil of my heart, that I was not in David's condition; the sense of which stopped my

mouth: and while others were singing, I mourned and wept for want of the pure spirit that David had, and which caused him to sing.²

Reading through the lenses given by *The Harp of Prophecy* we might perhaps see in this inability to sing Psalms – and the felt lack of any mediating term between the individual sufferer and “David” the singer – a symptom precisely of the social and ecclesial breakdown afflicting Dewsbury’s society. Particularly noteworthy is the embodied, emotional, in-the-moment confrontation provoked by the first-person of the Psalms, the urgency of asking who sings them – and the tension between (what we might call) the telos, the ‘pure spirit’, of the Psalms and the mixed and troubled condition of the believer in via.

How do the interpretive traditions explored in the *The Harp of Prophecy* explore this tension? For one major strand of reflection investigated in *The Harp of Prophecy*, the psalms are “therapeutic”, themselves the means that effects the sanctification of which they speak, transformative for the person who sings or speaks them. This in turn, however, rests on the identification of Christ as the ‘voice’ of the Psalms, into whose voice and life the pray-er enters. In this early sequence of essays in *The Harp of Prophecy*, focused on the therapeutic and transformative function of the Psalms, we see repeatedly how the singing of the Psalms itself becomes the ‘way’ – the ordering of the motions, both intellectual and desiring, of the soul towards its telos in God. On a similar note, Michael Cameron³ suggests that the “chief characteristic of Augustine’s Christian hermeneutics” is “the exchange by which Christians

² William Dewsbury, *The Discovery of the Great Enmity of the Serpent* (London, 1655), quoted in Edward Smith, *The Life of William Dewsbury, an Early and Eminent Minister of the Gospel in the Society of Friends* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1836), 26. Part of this passage appears in extract 19.05 of *Quaker Faith and Practice* (London: Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1995).

³ Michael Cameron, "The Emergence of Totus Christus as Hermeneutical Center in Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*", 205-26.

project themselves into the scriptures” (220). This exchange is made possible by the primary exchange between Christ and believers (as Cameron puts it, “life given for death, justice given for guilt”) – and all of this can be seen, or heard, going on in the Psalms. The pray-er of the Psalms can take up the voice of the totus Christus speaking the words of the Psalms – but, in the internal diversity and complexity of the Psalms, the pray-er can also hear the voice of the totus Christus ‘taking up’ the voices of suffering and lost humanity.

Furthermore, in the therapeutic and pedagogical readings of the Psalms discussed particularly in the first section of *The Harp of Prophecy*, David as the singer of the Psalms functions not only as a type of Christ but also as the precursor of the journeying and struggling soul. In the hands of the psalm interpreters particularly speaking from and for monastic contexts, the Psalms become manuals of spiritual warfare and spiritual struggle (described, for example, in Luke Dysinger’s essay on Evagrius Ponticus⁴), given first by the Holy Spirit to teach and guide David. David’s psalmic song is his life-journey as the monastic’s liturgical song is his life journey.

Already we have a bewildering range of simultaneous answers to the question “who speaks the Psalms” – a multiplicity of first-person voices among which the psalms themselves mediate. And we learn in *The Harp of Prophecy* about the range of interpretive techniques that enabled interpreters to make sense of the multitude of first-persons. Prosopological interpretation, used elsewhere in the ancient world to make sense of texts that were clearly dialogical and contained many voices, was used of the Psalms to make sense of the multiplicity of first-person address as the psalm texts journeyed through salvation-history.

⁴ Luke Dysinger, O.S.B. "Evagrius Ponticus: The Psalter as a Handbook for the Christian Contemplative", 97-125.

Even the oft-cited and superficially unifying insight that the first-person voice of the Psalms was the totus Christus still required prosopological interpretation to tease out the diversity of first-persons – where did the body of Christ speak and where did Christ speak as the head?

Also apparent in the *The Harp of Prophecy*, without being explicitly explored, are striking differences of social and ecclesial context – and hence of at least some of the answers to “who speaks the Psalms” and “who hears them spoken” – between the various interpretive texts discussed. At one point we hear the Psalms read as spiritual exercises for monastics or would-be ascetics (Dysinger on Evagrius Ponticus, and Paul R. Kolbet on Athanasius⁵); at another (in Michael McCarthy’s essay⁶) we see Augustine preaching marathon sermons on the Psalms, as his massed congregation shuffle their feet and wonder about whether to bunk off to the circus.

The latter example is particularly dense in first/second/third-person shifts, as the very localised “I” and “you” of the sermon is woven together with the psalmist’s “I”, you, we, they, and so forth. One of the questions this raises is how we should understand the pedagogical and transformative use of the Psalms – the exercise of speaking the “I” of the Psalms – to form the particularities of redeemed and transformed life. How does the speaking of these same Psalms function to make you the particular person or the particular church you are called to be? If the speaking of the Psalms in the first person is not simply ventriloquy, what is it?

⁵ Paul R. Kolbet, "Athanasius, the Psalms, and the Reformation of the Self", 75-96.

⁶ Michael C. McCarthy, S.J. "An Ecclesiology of Groaning: Augustine, the Psalms, and the Making of Church", 227-256.

This is a question about the relationship between divine creativity and creaturely freedom, but also perhaps a question about what it really means to understand the Psalms – how an interpretive text functions to enable psalmic pedagogy. As indicated in Brian E. Daley’s introduction to *The Harp of Prophecy*⁷, many premodern interpreters used Jerome’s image of the Psalms– used elsewhere of the whole of scripture or at least of the Old Testament read from Christian perspective. The text was a collection of doors with a collection of keys; the task of the interpreter, to match up the keys and the doors (14-15). In some of the interpretations discussed in *The Harp of Prophecy*, we feel the interpreter’s joy at solving a tricky problem of prosopological attribution – finally slotting the right key into the lock and hearing the barrels turn, making sense of the Psalm. But that instant “aha” moment, which we might think in fact “locks down” the meaning of the Psalm by finding the answer, stands in contrast with the emphasis elsewhere on the temporally-extended and locally-embodied labour of repeating the Psalms in particular contexts and setting them to work – for example, the communal chanting of Psalms before Augustine’s very long Psalm sermons.

So is the premodern (or any other) interpretive text about mainly telling people what they are supposed to learn from the Psalms, how the Psalms are supposed to affect them – turning the Psalms into a handy one-size-fits-all spiritual manual? And if so, what are the implications for the embodied differentiation within the body of Christ? To give the most obvious example, which is considered at length in *The Harp of Prophecy* – in what sense do the Psalms have a female voice as well as a male voice?

⁷ Brian E. Daley, S.J. "Find the Right Key: The Aims and Strategies of Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms", 11-28.

Figures of psalm-singing and psalm-saying women appear from time to time in the essays in *The Harp of Prophecy* – but treated at far more length is the female voice in Psalm 45, the wedding hymn. Here, for example in Verna Harrison’s essay⁸, we see how the crossings-over of voices in the Psalms continue in bewildering crossings-over of gender; for patristic interpreters the only context in which it is relevant to refer to Christ as “male” is in the nuptial context and to refer allegorically to the generative power of Christ’s divinity; the humanity of Christ (like the ecclesial body) is allegorically feminine; the whole wedding hymn reflects the hypostatic union as well as the union of Christ and the Church; and the male and female speakers of the psalm, so Harrison argues, are all shaped into the virtues, both “masculine” and “feminine”. This kind of reading draws gendered difference into the psalms in order to draw men’s and women’s voices, and spiritual paths, together. It is an appealing indication of how both the first-person recitation of the Psalms and the interpretive reflection on this recitation might reconfigure fixed and oppressive relations of social differentiation without reducing them all to the univocal “male-neutral” voice of an undifferentiated human norm.

But it’s clear that this was not all that was going on with patristic interpretation of gender in the Psalms. It’s hard to ignore entirely the fact that the interpretive texts are written by men whose authoritative voice speaks about women; the Psalms’ first-person address does not mean that they escape third-person uses. That same Psalm 45 was mobilised, we learn in David Hunter’s essay⁹, in male struggles for power and authority symbolically centred on the bodies of women. I wonder, as I read, *The Harp of Prophecy* what we can really say about

⁸ Nonna Verna Harrison, "Gender Allegories in Basil of Caesarea's Homily on Psalm 45", 127-48.

⁹ David G. Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine", 149-74.

how the voicing of the Psalms gives voice to (and not just about) the lives of women or of non-elite psalm-speakers. In posing the question I realise that it is not really a question about the “authority” of the psalms as they find voice within Christian communities, but more about the authority of the interpretive texts, the position within the ecclesial body from which the psalm interpreter hears himself and others speaking the Psalms, and the ways in which that shapes the questions and concerns of interpretation. As we have already implicitly seen, psalm interpretation is not just a matter of engaging with the tension occasioned by ‘hearing oneself speak’ in the first person singular and relating one’s own condition to the voice of David ; it also entails hearing a communal voice, engagement with the first person plural, and reflection on the localised and embodied dynamics and struggles of speaking and hearing. The Harp of Prophecy invites further reflection on how to incorporate suspicious questions about the authority and the positionality of the interpretive text into an account of psalm interpretation as “hearing oneself speak”.

One of the directions in which that reflection might turn is to Augustine’s interpretation. Augustine appears in *The Harp of Prophecy*, in the essays by Cameron and McCarthy, trying to preach sermons about the Psalms to a divided community that still says the Psalms together. Augustine picks up in the intense suffering and yearning in the “I” of the Psalms, a yearning for renewal of communal life, here in the present and on the way to the kingdom— developing, as Michael McCarthy puts it, “an ecclesiology of groaning” (and as Paul Blowers puts it in relation to Maximus¹⁰, directing the Psalms “unto the end”). This crossing-over of the psalms’ “groaning”, from individual suffering to a shared movement of

¹⁰ Paul M. Blowers, "A Psalm 'Unto the End': Eschatology and Anthropology in Maximus the Confessor's Commentary on Psalm 59", 257-83.

transformation, seems a fruitful space for contemporary reflection on and with the patristic psalm commentators. We know from numerous recent examples how the intense first-person lyricism of love poetry or lyric song can become a voice – sometimes the only available voice – to cry for social or political change and to enter into solidarity at the point of deepest suffering, loss or brokenness. Perhaps this even takes us back somewhere close to the suffering of William Dewsbury – whose words about his inability to say the psalms in community begin to sound, themselves, like a psalm of lament. Taken together, then, the essays in *The Harp of Prophecy*, and the commentaries they discuss, hold out the possibility of interpretive reflection and deep theological work that never becomes detached from the passionate longing of the first-person speaker.