

The Psalm: Ethical and Critical Notes Referring to its Media History

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Structure:

1. Goal; 2. Psalms in Antiquity; 3. Psalms in the Middle Ages; 4. Psalms in the Modern Age and in the New Media; 5. Conclusion

1. Goal

1.1 In the beginning there was this one human being with his word, his prayer, his song. He murmured, spoke, sang, screamed, swore, blessed and prayed it: his suffering, his joy. Others recognized the expression of their own situation in it. They repeated the text – privately or in public. Thus, models and forms (psalms) are generated voicing out human basic experience and remaining valid for more than two millennia. We use numerous verbal expressions in our daily communication without thinking of the psalms from which they originated, such as, “From everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 90) or “Wine pleases the heart of man: (Ps. 104). The rhetorical meaning of the psalms throughout the centuries lies in the fact, that they have been spoken and heard (orality), set to music and sung, written and read (literarity), and calligraphically designed, updated and digitally alienated (electronically) today. This begins with a song accompanied by a lyre (also harp), goes on with synagogical and later Gregorian responsorial psalms, Bach’s motets, goes to gospel singers, records, broadcasting and finally ends (temporarily) with performances on the Internet.

In some notes (1-5) the media history of psalms, using the examples of selected psalms, shall be illuminated.

1.2 Psalms have arisen between the 10th and the third century before Christ. From their original cultic place in life they “wandered” into

religion and developed their own forms and genres. They are religious prayers and songs of and to Yahweh (God); (for glossolalia, the ‘speaking in tongues’ from God to the human, see Barthel 2009).

Psalms can be considered as poems, that is, in the “parallelismus membrorum” created texts. Their distinguishing mark is that their second verse expresses a similar thought to the first one. The rhyme is unknown. But other rhetorical means can be found, e.g. alliterations, puns or the beginning of each verse with a word that begins with a letter in alphabetical order. In the broader sense psalms indicate not only clerical songs and psalm poetry, but also music compositions.

The comprehensive cultural-rhetorical meaning of the psalms appears here again: they are significant in the history of life and religiousness, and they are the intersection of the liturgy and poetry. A broad analysis shows that psalms are defined by rhetorical forms, which display the fundamental speech acts such as praise, thanks, pleas, complaints, but also lessons and appeals (Schroeer 2005, col. 401).

Psalms can be coarsely differentiated into seven basic categories, according to structure and function: lament, plea, praise, thanks, Zions, Kings and wisdom psalms (Zenger 2005, col. 396f.). The Hebrew Text as well as the Septuaginta (and its follower, the Vulgata) combines 150 psalms – of different sources and times – in the (biblical) “Book of Psalms,” the “Psalter.” The Greek word “Psalter” goes back to a stringed instrument, a standing lyre (Hossfeld/Zenger 1993, 3). On the one hand the texts of the Psalter want to be read and understood as single texts; on the other hand they are also part of more sizable “psalm groups,” or rather the whole

psalm book. (But psalms can also be found in other, frequently structurally outstanding places of the Bible, for example in the Song of Solomon, in the King's and prophet's books.) For poets and musicians, the Psalter has always served as a source of inspiration.

1.3 Basic hypothesis: The responsible handling of (selected) psalms shows the history of reception and attitudes of people. Referring to these notes the handling shall be reflected in (selected) psalm performances, this means in visual, musical and/or rhetorical communications. Thus, the notes try to demonstrate how people deal with psalms in a visual, musical and/or rhetorical manner.

1.4 Methodically seen, a synthesis in a new time-related frame is taken: It is precisely the synthesis of acoustic and optic culture, that is a co-existence and a cooperation of "mute" texts to

be read on the one hand, and of pictures and sound as well as action on the other hand. A pattern of criteria for the usability of psalm performances should help to comprehend the psalms' media history better – from the biblical chanting song (accompanied by instruments) via the acoustic "tribal culture" of the Middle Ages and the constricted one channel typographic culture of the (early) Modern Age to the multi-channel culture of the new media today (McLuhan quoted from Küpper 2008, 432f.).

Being committed to the basic idea of a social-pragmatic "Ethics of Dialogic" results in the claim to 'truthfulness', 'correctness' and 'responsibility' (Geißner 1995, 443 and 449f.).

The following pattern then shows the "Tools of Rhetoric," with whose help the psalm performances – according to their ethical dimension – can be analyzed and interpreted:

	Contents of the psalm performance	Design of the psalm performance	Structure of the psalm performance
(Ethical) claim for veracity, i.e. considering the dialogue	(not) fulfilled	(not) fulfilled	(not) fulfilled
(Ethical) claim for correctness/truth of the "things" displayed	(not) fulfilled	(not) fulfilled	(not) fulfilled
(Ethical) claim for liability, i.e. acceptance of perspective ("You-orientation")	(not) fulfilled	(not) fulfilled	(not) fulfilled

Chart: Pattern of criteria for the "usefulness" of psalm performances (based on Geißner 1995 and Küpper 2008, 473-484)

1.5 The following notes (2-4) cover psalm performances of the Antiquity (1000 B.C. – 4th century), Middle Ages (4th – 15th century) and the Modern Age (15th – 20th/ 21st century).

2. Psalms in Antiquity

2.1 For the description and interpretation of the psalm performances in early Antiquity, the

Deuteronomistic and the Chronistic Works of History – beside archeological materials – are available. The following notes are based on psalm 15 and 150, respectively. Hereby, this section introduces King David (around 10th century B. C.) as an initiator of the cultic music and Hieronymus' "Commentarioli in Psalmos" (Engl. "Notes on the Psalter") as well as musical performances (performance practice); (for the exist-

ence of a psalmodic practice in the early synagogue see 3.2).

2.2 Psalm 15 “LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary [...]” presumably comes from the time after exile, that means after 539 B. C.

Psalm 15
A psalm of David

¹ LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary?
Who may live on your holy hill?

² He whose walk is blameless
and who does what is righteous,
who speaks the truth from his heart

³ and has no slander on his tongue,
who does his neighbor no wrong
and casts no slur on his fellowman,

⁴ who despises a vile man
but honors those who fear the LORD,
who keeps his oath
even when it hurts,

⁵ who lends his money without usury
and does not accept a bribe against the innocent.
He who does these things
will never be shaken.

(New International Version 1984,
www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm 15&version=NIV1984)

It is mostly interpreted as a ‘liturgical form’ (e. g. Groß/Reinelt 1978, 83; Krauss 1961, 111; Schneider 1995, 113). As usual in the old oriental cult it is about a kind of ‘exchange talk in three acts’:

1. Question of the pilgrims in front of the temple gate to enter the sanctuary of Jerusalem (v. 1);
2. Answer of the (Levitic) gatekeeper who introduces a number of conditions (v. 2-5c);
3. Acceptance/Promise spoken by a priest (v. 5de) (Zenger 2005, 40).

The main point of the answer lies in the preservation of human dignity and integrity as well as in law and truth (Weber 2001, 95), in the ‘truthful speech out of nobleness’ (v. 2b; Hossfeld 1993, 107) and in the fellow human ethos (v. 3b – see second mosaic table of the Decalogue; Deissler 1964, 67). “This strong accentuation of the moral accounts for the inner highness of the simple psalm” (Gunkel 1986, 48). The ethical claims should be reflected in its performances.

2.3 King David (title in psalm 15) is almost the true Israelite, the representative of obedience to the commandments of God (Torah) (Weber 2001, 94).



David Playing the Harp, Jan de Bray, 1670

According to 2 Samuel 6, 5 the obtaining of the ark took place at the planned foundation of the temple with music and the cultic dance of King David. According to psalm 33, 2-3 and psalm 92, 2-4 an established ensemble of cultic instruments seemed to have existed. The most interesting information is found in psalm 150 “Praise God in his sanctuary [...]”.

Psalm 150

¹ Praise the LORD.

Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.

² Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.

³ Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,

⁴ praise him with tambourine and dancing,
praise him with the strings and flute,

⁵ praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.

⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the
LORD.
Praise the LORD.

(New International Version-UK;
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%20150&version=NIVUK>)

The literary structure of the psalm corresponds to the temple structure: First God is praised with horns (trumpets) outside of the temple building. Musicians with harp (also lyre, psaltery) and zither follow at the margin of the atrium. In the atrium of the laymen the women praise God with kettledrums (frame drums) and dancing. Professional musicians strike up with stringed instruments. The people make noise with cymbals (According to Seidel 1994, 443).

During the Hellenic-Roman Age (3rd – 1st century B.C.), David is considered as the most important music organizer, as poet of psalms and songs as well as a builder of music instruments (Seidel, 444).

2.4 Hieronymus (ca. 347 – 419/20) wrote the “*Commentarioli in Psalmos*” between 386 and 388. The attraction of this psalm explanation lies in the fact that it only consists of short notes. For example, Hieronymus gives these notes on Psalm 15 (LXX and Vulgata; Ps. 14):

3d *Et obprobrium non accepit adversus proximos suos. Numquam a suis vicinis quasi noxius accusatur.*

4b *Timentes autem I Dominum magnificat. Non divites glorificat, non potentes: sed eos tantum qui Dominum timent.*” (Hieronymus 2005, 106)

(“3d *And abuse against his next he did not accept. Never is he indicted guilty by his neighbors.*”

4b *But those who fear the Lord, he praises. Not the rich he praises, not the mighty, but only those who fear the Lord*” (translated from Latin).

Hieronymus compares his action with that of a cartographer who describes the position of countries and towns drawing a few lines and signs on a small board and thus provides a survey over extended areas. The notes do not only offer explanations to understand the psalm texts, but also clues of the theological thinking and the debate with the heretics of this time (Risse 2005, 7, 23 and 54ff.).

2.5 Interpretation of the psalm performances in Antiquity

There were professional musicians inside as well as outside the cult. Only men were cult musicians. They played the lyre, the harp and – in the time after exile – the cymbal. As the psalm titles say, the musicians commanded a stock of texts and performance sessions. The poetical structure of the psalms implies a liturgical exchange song and a responsorial exchange between a chorister / cantor and the choir / community. The community answered with calls and acclamations like “Amen,” “Hallelujah,” “Forever lasts his faithfulness” and similar things. The musicians were able to accompany the song with instruments. The psalm titles contain little information about the practice of the performances (Seidel 1994, 445). That is why the psalm performances cannot be assessed.

In contrast to more detailed comments, the notes of Hieronymus demand more meditation from the reader. The reader is not guided along the text of the psalms, but will rather be put at one particular spot and has to unlock the context with the help of the short note (Risse 2005, 7). Thus, the translator, commentator and theologian Hieronymus fulfills the (ethical) claim of liability, i.e. acceptance of perspectives (“You-orientation”).

3. Psalms in the Middle Ages

3.1 Before the interpretation of psalm performances in the Middle Ages, the psalmodian

practice in the early synagogue has to be addressed to understand the basis of the Gregorian choral.

3.2 Psalmodia marks the musical presentations (cantillation) of the psalms and psalm sounds in the Old and New Testaments (Praßl 2003, col. 1785). As newer ethno-musicological research prove, the Hebrew psalmodia already was positioned in the synagogue at the time of the 2nd temple (21 B. C.) (Adler/Flender 1994, 448). The reciting of the psalms belonged to a broadly anchored custom among the Jewish people, being hardly bound to a fixed liturgical context. As the Torah and prophet reading, the psalmodia is a specific form of the chanting song of the holy scripts. Its most important structural reciting elements are: rising melody (initium), the tenor to recite the psalm, turn in the half cadence (mediato) and descent to the final cadence (finalis) of the psalm form (Michels 1997, 163 and 181).

3.3 Around the year 400 all of the (responso-rial and antiphonal) forms and presentations of the psalmodia were already developed, which were to be constitutive for the later Gregorian choral. (Harden 2007, 19) The Latin liturgical singing, still practiced today in the Catholic Church, is named after Pope Gregory I (590-604).

The basic idea of the Gregorian choral consists in the fact that each liturgical “station” is allocated to a specific “variation” of choral music play in the masses. Thus each of the ritual services gets its own distinctive course profile. In its entirety the Gregorian choral displays a highly complex architecture of great variety and balance (Harden 2007, 22).

Excursus:

Orlando di Lasso (1532-1594), the most famous composer of the High Renaissance (!), has gained fame with a cycle of seven extensive motets, whose texts are psalms (6, 31, 37, 101, 129 and 142). They have been felt as a group of repentance texts belonging together since the time of the late Antiquity.

Each page of the choir books (with the psalm motets) was equipped with gorgeous miniatures by the Munich painter Hans Mielich, which ranks among the most important of illumination from the 16th century (see also Leuchtmann/Schaefer 1994).

3.4 Interpretation of the psalm performances in the Middle Ages

The rhetorical meaning of the Gregorian Age lies in its originally public meaning. The acquisition of the manner of social publication (performances) serves primarily the conveying of the “message” and gives this vocal music not only an edifying and laudative sense, but also public sense (ethical claim to truthfulness, talkability). At the same time, the psalmodia allows the text its own right. Psalmodia is not the art of expression, but rather a non-sacral form and function in itself, using the eight psalm sounds (Schroeer 2005, col. 404).

About 1455, the first large printing of the “42-line Bible” of Johann Gutenberg is published. The book printing quickly spreads throughout Europe and opens up unimagined new options of education and teaching.

4. Psalms in the Modern Age and in the New Media

4.1 There are manifold documents in literature and music for the depiction and interpretation of the psalm performances in the Modern Age and new media. Pluralism in every way is characteristic... (Krieg 1994, 483).

4.2.1 Examples from the Modern Age

- 16th century: Martin Luther has exposed (Vorreden zur Bibel, WA DB 10, 1, 102) the rhetorical meaning of the psalms affectively referring to God and faith: “Da siehest du allen Heiligen ins Herz, wie in den Tod, ja wie in die die Hölle [...] Also auch wo sie von Furcht und Hoffnung reden, brauchen sie solche Worte, dass dir kein Maler also könnte die Furcht oder Hoffnung abmalen [...]”. (“You look into all the saints’ hearts, like you look at death,

just like you look into hell [...] Thus, even if they speak of fruit and hope, they need such words, that no painter could depict [...]; translated from German.) (See also Luther's abstract for psalm 15 in WA 38, 23, 1-8.)

Since the Reformation, the psalm has belonged to the most used literary forms (Kurz 1997, 259). That was to be reflected in numerous musical compositions...

- 17th century: e. g. Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672), "Aus der Tiefe ruf ich, Herr, zu Dir [...]" (cp. 18th century, Bach), psalm 130 from: Psalms of David; Johann Rosenmüller (around 1619-1684), "Vespro della beata Vergine."
- 18th century: e. g. Johann S. Bach (1685-1750), "Aus der Tiefe ruf ich, Herr, zu Dir [...]," a setting of psalm 130 from BWV 131 (1707/08), *De Profundis*.

Dingeman van Wijnen (2001, 272f.) wrote about this work of one of the greatest composers in music history:

The 'Aus der Tiefe' theme is present at once in the orchestral introduction, and is then sung many times in ever changing combinations of voices. The word 'Rufe' gets long sustaining notes. A vivace follows, homophonous at first, then with separate voices singing a prayer to God, with the word 'Flehens' effectively set. Then it is andante again, a recitative-like aria with chorale, the two texts commenting on each other as usual in such combinations. The next chorus once again starts with chords on 'Ich harre des Herrn' followed by intense climbing figures for alto and tenor and then a delightfully long fugue. The next duet 'Meine Seele wartet' combines free verse and a chorale again, indicating that what we are waiting for, is to be washed clean from our sin. The final chorus has the by now familiar homophonous entry, three dramatic cries of 'Israel!', followed by an allegro and another adagio with a beautiful oboe melody, then another allegro and then a double fugue with long runs on 'erlösen' and chromatic steps on 'Sünden'.

With the Enlightenment, Idealism and Classicism, a next step in the media history of the psalm unfolds. Poetry takes over the function of religious edification with a detached attitude towards the church (perhaps in the sense of Goethe's secular gospel). Odes and hymns are written; F. G. Klopstock, F. Hölderlin and F. L. Novallis offer explicit examples.

- 19th century: e. g. Franz Lachner (1803-1890), psalm 15 from sacred choir works; Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1849), "Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied [...]", psalm 98.

After Romanticism there was a restraint, but in the Expressionism the genre of psalm poetry (without the necessity to rhyme) is newly discovered and used in many cases up to the present.

- 20th century: Paul K. Kurz (1978 and 1997) published excellent anthologies of such psalm poetry. A distinctive example is Bertolt Brecht (quoted by Schroeder 2005, col. 403), noting: "I have to write psalms again, the rhyming delays too much." The free rhymes as a new poetical alternative further this tendency. Strongly involved is always the poetry of Jewish tradition, even if some of the poets (E. Lasker-Schüler; N. Sachs) clearly avoid the genre name, but virtually write psalms all the same. One highlight is P. Celan's often-quoted psalm "Nobody forms us again." I. Bachmann and P. Huchel also created poems with the title "Psalm" of the highest standard. The changes in the literary situation are shown in the "Tutzinger Poem Circle" (1951) by M. L. Kaschnitz. New texts are taking over the psalm poetry in an alienating style. Also, the psalm poems of K. Marti, E. Eggimann and Th. Bernhard are phrased poetically insistent. Even if abandoning the title "Psalm," poetical closeness comes up, e. g. in P. Handke's poem "In the length of time." The function incumbent on the *ornatus* in the rhetoric, performs the music in the (Lutheran)

church song... (Schroeer 2005, col. 403f.): e. g. Mahalia Jackson, "The Lord is my shepherd [...]", psalm 23; Bob Marley, "Rivers of Babylon [...]", psalm 137.

4.2.2 Two examples from the 21st century (new media)

- Volker Eigenbrod, (www.psalmen.de). Here you can read and listen to the biblical psalms, interpreted by V. Eigenbrod.
- "The Psalm Project," (www.psalmenprojekt.de). In the psalm project, famous artists like Eva Mattes (actress), Xavier Naidoo (pop artist), Florian Sitzmann (live-keyboarder, lecturer), and others sing and speak psalms.

4.3 Interpretation of psalm performances in Modern Age and in the new media

When it comes to an interpretation of literature and music in the Modern Age, due to the quantity of psalm performances, numerous moments have to be considered... It can be roughly stated, that from the 16th to the 20th century, there is very impressive evidence of the responsible handling of psalms. In Internet performances of the 21st century, the "psalmists" sometimes encounter the limits of their own finiteness, and the "psalmists" show their search for identity detecting an 'absurd' world, whose meaning fades at the margins into something unrecognizable (B. Russel quoted from Krieg 1994, 492). Thus, very often the "usefulness" of psalm performances seems to be not fulfilled!

5. Conclusion

These notes have illuminated the media history of selected psalms throughout Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Age. Since the data presented here are not representative of the Psalms in their entirety, the analysis of the chosen psalm performances cannot verify the beginning thesis (see 1. 3). Nevertheless, the first results of the analysis show rudimentarily, how the history of the reception and attitudes of the people shows itself in the (not always) responsible handling of psalms. This can serve as a preliminary study for a larger investigation of the media history of the psalms. Future studies could investigate how stronger still artistic music has been influenced by the psalms (20th century: P. Tschaikowski; A. Bruckner; M. Reger; I. Stravinski; K. Pederecki; L. Bernstein; K. Stockhausen et al.). The relationship between liturgy and concert, cult and poetry would also be emphatically recognizable, as in poetry. (Schroeer 1997, 635).

It should have been understood, that every single psalm passed down to us has to be heard and read out of its history of origins: out of a long and broad (oral and written) prehistory, at whose end, perhaps, the 'electronic revolution' (W. S. Burroughs) of the psalm is standing?

The importance of the psalm in the visual arts has hardly been explored yet, although there are strong samples for it as well. They are more than illustrations (e. g. the standard work "Das Buch der Psalmen: Ein Eschbacher Bilderpsalter in acht Bänden", ed. by Schmeisser 1990). The biblical psalms are prayers, songs, and texts from our own history: That is why they should be taken out of the religious niche and studied in their full sociocultural context, through the ages and in various media.

(Transl. by Sylvia Iden and Henner Barthel)

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