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**THE PSALTER AS A HOUSE OF VOICES**  
**OR: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE PSALMS**

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*"One thing God has said,  
two have I heard" (Ps 62:12)*

**Roma locuta?**

Reading the Psalms as a Christian: Yes. Reading the Psalms in a Christian way: How can that work? Can there even be a specifically Christian way of reading the texts? At first glance, this seems like a bold reflection. After all, this is precisely the insight that has been gained over the last decades: The Psalms are genuine texts of the (Hebrew) Bible and of Israel. So how can one read them in a Christian way without "distorting" them? But the other way around, one has to acknowledge that this is precisely what happens in the New Testament. Jesus is presented as the person who knows the Psalms and who prays them and who uses them to make a point. At the same time, in his passion, he becomes not only the person who prays Ps 22, but he enters into an intensive reciprocal relationship with this Psalm, so that he not only prays the Psalm; rather, the Psalm comes true in his entire passion and his deliverance from death. Jesus is one of the many believers before and after him who prayed with the opening words of this Psalm. At the same time, he has a very special position in praying Ps 22. The text of Ps 22 is what makes the event of the passion understandable, which is to say "readable". And the other way around, in a Christian-Easter view, Jesus becomes the exemplary person in whom the entire Psalm becomes true: from the experience of being abandoned by God, over being delivered from death, to the unforeseeable number of coming generations, who come forth from this deed of deliverance. Following this interpretation, the Psalms are not perceived primarily as "prayer" in the New Testament, but rather mainly as prophetic texts, as Scripture in the form of authoritative prophetic teaching.

A Christian interpretation of the Psalms cannot ignore this. It is only through the person of Jesus Christ that the Book of Psalms came to Christians. Nevertheless, or precisely because of this, it must be possible to develop a Christian way of reading the Psalms without covering up or even expropriating the genuine Israelite-Jewish origin of the texts.

The saying "*Roma locuta, causa finita*" [Rome has spoken, the matter is settled] is well known. It mirrors a human need as well as a social necessity. A controversy, an ambiguous situation is solved by means of a concluding final word spoken by the recognized authority. This also contains an aspect having to do with language: the resolution of a conflict comes about through an unequivocal word that is spoken.

Scripture has also become an element in such a discourse around the truth in various conflicts, and the New Testament testifies that in the conflict around the significance of Jesus Christ for Israel and the Nations, the Psalter, understood as a prophetic book, was used to argue. However, one may not see rational spoken and written arguments as equalling a lack of ambiguity that is taken for granted, even if over and over again such uniformity and clarity were tempting.

“Every Christian will confirm that the Book of Psalms is a distinctly Christian book.” Sometimes this leads to unintentional funny situations. I remember a conversation with two Calvinist pastors from the Netherlands. We were speaking in German about the Psalms. By chance, I opened the Tanakh at the 53rd chapter of the Psalms and came to the paragraph: “Oh that help would come to Israel out of Zion”. I asked the pastors: “What does this have to do with Christians?” They looked at me as if I had come from the moon. “This is unambiguously a Christian verse!” they said. “‘Zion’ is the Church, and ‘Israel’s help’ is Jesus.” (Yeshayahu Leibowitz)

Here too in a sense, a “*Roma locuta*” occurred, and Scripture’s lack of ambiguity was claimed that in the described situation of communication showed itself to be untenable and not at all universally valid. Such a “Christian” interpretation of the Psalms proves to be a clear adsorption, but this only becomes recognizable when a representative of Judaism is bodily present in the conversation and can give his or her own interpretation or at least express their protest in the face of this understanding of Scripture. It is obvious that giving such a uniform interpretation to Scripture is untenable. However, to reject with it every Christian approach to the Book of Psalms would also again be a uniform interpretation, namely a discourse from which Christians would withdraw and leave reflection on the text entirely to Judaism.

However, the starting point for the following thoughts should not be primarily the differing discourses on Scripture and the demands for unambiguity in Judaism and Christianity, but rather, these reflections should begin with the literary form of the Psalter itself.

### **The Psalter as “Speech”, not “Narrative”**

“*Roma locuta, causa finita*”. Who is speaking in the Psalms? The decisive point of departure lies with the voices in the Psalter. In classical Old Testament exegesis, the Psalter is generally seen as “Israel’s answer” to the revelation coming from God. However, the Book of Psalms contains more than one answer. One look at the literary characteristics and the structure of the interwoven text can help towards a deeper insight.

If we look at the beginning of the Psalter, we see that it opens by a beatitude: “Blessed the person who has not walked according to the counsel of the wicked ...” If we look at this from the point of view of the “voices” in the Psalter, the unusual question comes up: Who is speaking in Ps 1? In contrast to the “narrating voice” in narrative literature, one could speak here of a “voice of speech” that is saying something not in a narrative way but rather more expressively.

### **The Psalter – the Book of the “Voice”**

By its force, this is perhaps only comparable to the beginning of Genesis, where literally out of the void a narrative voice begins to express itself in order to describe the beginning of the order of creation by God. Here in Ps 1 something similar happens, except that the unknown narrative voice / speech voice proclaims a teaching, a beatitude. Thus based on the literary structure, the voice of a teacher of wisdom expresses itself in Ps 1, a voice that invites those who hear it to enter

into the role of pupils, and this calls upon them to let themselves be taught. The entire Psalter is introduced as “speech”, as a teaching of wisdom having to do with the Torah.

The next signal in the text which explicitly confirms such a hypothesis for the reading of the Psalter’s “speech structure” is then given in the title of Ps 3. This informs by attributing it to a speaker, whereby לְדָוִד makes a double way of reading possible: Either it is read as *lamed auctoris* as do many classical translations, thus indicating the author, “by David”, or as *lamed dedicationes*, so to speak as a dedication, and with that at the same time as a guideline for the interpretation by stating: The words that now follow can be put into the mouth of David.

The title offers a way of receiving the text: David might have prayed like this in his situation of being persecuted, so you too can pray in this way. The “voice of David” can therefore become the voice of everyone who prays. And the Psalm itself shows several levels. For the most part it directly addresses God. The speech voice of the person praying itself quotes another voice, that of the adversary: “Many say of my soul: ‘There is no deliverance for him with God’” (Ps 3:3). The “godless talk” of the enemies is turned towards God and thereby made harmless. In this way, Psalm 3 becomes a cloth woven of many voices. And that in no way means that the voices are simply lined up next to one another. Rather, they are artistically linked with one another. Quoting the words of the enemy represents something like a strategy, because through the conscious change of the person addressed, it completely turns around the pragmatics of what was said originally. The sentence, “there is no deliverance with God”, is so to speak “bent” and addressed directly to God.

In addition to this, more forms of voices can be found in other Psalms: throughout the entire Psalter it can be heard that God himself enters in, and what God says can be heard in the Psalms as direct quotation. And finally, there is also the phenomenon that the person praying turns directly to his or her enemies and calls upon them to convert.

## **Heteroglossia**

The phenomenon presented here of very different voices that resound was first described in literary science by the Russian literary theoretician Michail M. Bakhtin, who gave it the name of “heteroglossia”. Based on novels, Bakhtin showed that many voices represent a constitutive phenomenon of this large genre. It follows from this that the author steps aside a little, because he leaves the field to the various voices that are acting differently linguistically and his or her own intentions are broken by these voices; but he and she still remain the author, because they determine the shape of the order and express themselves in it. Bakhtin speaks of “artistically organized diversity of speech”. The formulation chosen by Bakhtin, that the author does not speak “*in* a language but *through* a language [...]” is very nice. The author expresses him- or herself by means of various “modes”: in the choice of the individual voices that come to word, in the shape of the narrator, but also in the way the narrative itself is designed, and the position held by the narrative does not have to be the same as that of the narrator.

The point is not solely to capture in an appropriate theoretical manner the possibility of reproducing complex realities; there is also an “anti-ideological impetus” in the background. The opposite of heteroglossia is monoglossia: One single author speaks with one single voice. What at first glance seems to be clear and meaningful, certainly has an ideological component, for in this way, one single position can be presented. Monoglossia is not appropriate for expressing the complex structure of reality.

## The Stacking of Voices in the Psalter

The phenomenon of heteroglossia can also be applied to the Psalter. A speciality of the Psalter is that heteroglossia can be seen not only as taking into the Psalter's structure an abundance of quoted voices, but that these voices are often stacked one after the other. In Ps 3, one "speech voice" expresses itself; it quotes the voice of the adversary, whereby the latter is however changed, for it now stands in a new and very different context. By means of the title, the Psalm as a whole becomes a quotation of David's voice, or such a context for using it is suggested. The Psalm is set – fictitiously – into David's biography. The person reading the Psalter listens to the voice of the exemplarily pious "David", for according to the composition, that is how he is introduced by connecting the two books.

If one then also takes seriously the opening Psalm in the Psalter, Ps 1, as the proem, the preface to the entire book, the Psalter becomes a teaching of life according to the Torah proclaimed by the voice of a teacher of wisdom and of Torah who remains anonymous.

If one follows this system of stacked heteroglossia, it has consequences for the perception and reading of the entire Psalter. Every single verse can be heard and perceived in itself as an expressive statement. The way the various verses are put together, the directions in which the speaking goes, and the voices in the composition of the entire Psalm again result in a new composition, the words of the enemies are redesigned into prayer, next to the words of prayer and petition come the words of God, which give the petitions the certainty of being heard. The dialog between the human person and God is represented in the Psalms – by means of the phenomenon of heteroglossia – as being successful. Over and beyond this, the text offers other possibilities to enter into it, for the title makes it possible to understand it as a Davidic text. And based on the opening of the entire book, the entire Psalter as text becomes the teaching for life of a voice of wisdom that teaches Torah in the mode of the Psalter.

What is special is that none of the levels of speech rejects or makes impossible what is at the other level. What the higher text level says does not take anything away from the dignity of the lower level. The stacking of voice levels does not represent a hierarchy! The fact that according to Ps 1, the Psalter is wisdom teaching, does not represent an opposition to the title of Ps 3, for example, which says that it is a Psalm of David, nor does it revoke the perception of the body of Psalms as one prayer text.

Nothing that is at another level is taken back; however, at the next level it is quoted into a new context. Even the words of the enemy keep their bitterness and sharpness, but they are placed before a new audience, they are answered and thereby transformed.

The stacking of the voices represents a complex offer to the audience for receiving the text. But the audience remains free to choose at which level it wants to hear the text: as the individual voices, as the composition of the voices in the individual Psalm, the Psalm as a quotation from the mouth of David, or as a quotation from the mouth of a teacher of wisdom who proclaims what life with the Torah could look like.

By means of the literary strategy of heteroglossia, the Psalter is made useful for very different situations in which it is heard and read.

## Heteroglossia and a Christian Reading of the Psalter

What does this approach mean for a Christian dealing with the Psalms? The decisive question is, what the goal of a Christian dealing with the Psalms is supposed to be. The point is that Christians be able to receive these texts as believing people. So there has to be more than a look at the nature of the texts from the point of view of a history of religion. There must be a form of identification with these texts, an entry into them. At the same time, it is imperative that one's own use of these texts does not expropriate them, does not take them from the people of Israel and from Judaism, as was shown by the anecdote at the beginning, which can be seen as typical of a centuries long Christian use of the Psalms: in the consciousness of one's own "insight", this use took on traits that had completely forgotten Israel.

Christians cannot avoid looking critically at the Christian use of the Psalms, for it is at the origin of their own foundational history. The Christology of the New Testament is to a large extent a Christology of the Psalms. The Psalms represent texts for the interpretation of the person and the function of Jesus Christ.

From the beginning and in many ways, the Psalter is also the book of Jesus Christ and about Jesus Christ. Jesus grew up in the Jewish tradition of biblical piety with the Psalms, he knew these texts by heart, he prayed with them and argued with them in controversial conversations or when teaching. He thereby stands before us as an exemplary representative of the people of God Israel, and he brings the whole of Christendom into this people's faith.

In the same way, Jesus found himself in many different ways in the texts of the Psalms. That is why the Psalms are understood in the New Testament as the texts that speak of Jesus Christ. The Psalms serve for understanding the doing and suffering of Jesus Christ as Son of God in all its depth. Ps 22 becomes the accompanying text for interpreting the passion in the Gospel according to Mark, which illustrates the fate of the righteous person who is innocent but suffering and who is saved. Ps 110 is the Psalm that is most often quoted in the New Testament; Jesus based his Davidic-messianic title on it (Mk 12:35-37). And in the proclamation of the apostles, the Son of Man, who in this Psalm sits at the right hand of God, was understood to be the Lord Jesus Christ, who was raised up and who will return (Acts 2:33-36; Heb 1:13; cf. Mk 14:62).

Augustine picks up the way the New Testament deals with the Psalms. For him, the entire Psalter is the book of Christ. Of course, it was clear to him that such an attribution could not occur simply by equalling the text of the Psalms with Christological aims. Therefore, Augustine differentiated doubly in a way that from today's point of view as well is remarkable: On the one hand, he was very sensitive to the heteroglossia of the Psalms, to the very different directions in which their speech went. And on the other hand, he also differentiated his image of Christ, he saw embodied in him very different "roles" and could therefore attribute very different functions to Christ. In this way, simple total identification is avoided, or said with the word from literary science: monoglossia is avoided!

"Christ can be the speaker, the one spoken to or the object of the Psalm [...]." For Augustine this means that very different "voices" can be identified in the Psalms: the *"vox ad Christum, vox de Christo / vox de ecclesia, vox Christi / vox ecclesiae, vox totius Christi"* (the voice that turns to Christ; the voice that speaks of Christ; the voice about the Church; the voice in which Christ, in which the Church expresses itself; the voice of the entire Christ).

The role and so with it also the voice of Christ is divided into various voices: The "I" that in the Psalms expresses itself in lament, in prayer and in praise of God, can thus also be identified with Christ. Here, Jesus Christ becomes for Christians the exemplary person praying, the brother among brothers and sisters who have appropriated the Psalm for themselves – and as the one

leading the prayer and the one praying with others, he brings Christendom into this prayer of Israel's. But according to the testimony of the New Testament, Augustine also read the Psalter as a book that not only teaches the faith of Jesus Christ, but also his fate, his significance for the redemption of humankind.

When Augustine connects all the voices in the Psalter with Christ, a serious difficulty arises with the verses in which the "speech voice" confesses his and her guilt. This does not fit with the teaching about Christ's guiltlessness. But Augustine can also draw this in, for here he recognizes Christ as the speaker who speaks these words vicariously for his body, which is to say, for all the members of the Church.

For Jewish ears, this interpretation of Christ as mediator must not be understandable, but it can to a certain extent be drawn into the phenomenon of heteroglossia. When Christian tradition reads the Psalter christologically, it adds to the heteroglossia of the text a further voice-dimension which takes up the abundance of the other voice dimensions in the text and presupposes these, certainly never crosses them out or makes them invalid. All these levels remain and form a possible common basis of faith and of Jewish-Christian dialog. According to this understanding, Psalter-Christology is an added Christology and not a substitute Christology. It does not change the text and does not interpret it differently as against other interpretations, but rather, it adds to it a further dimension of reading and thus adds another voice-dimension. Of course, it is one without which Christians as believers would not have access to this text.

It is also important that even in the Christian way of reading, the text of the Psalms is not changed around to become a monoglossia text that becomes so to speak an entirely uniform, exclusive Christ-voice. On the contrary, precisely the heteroglossia of the Psalter's text is the precondition so that all the dimensions belonging to Christ's function can be drawn in, but in an inclusive and not an exclusive way. To the text's many levels of interpretation, a new level of interpretation is added. However, for Christians this level has decisive significance, for it is a way in which they themselves can be included in these texts. Thus, such an understanding is a "committed understanding": It is necessary if someone wants to enjoy the Psalms not only as literary texts, but wishes to make them existentially his and her own, wants not only to read them, but also to pray them without themselves being members of the Jewish people. For Christians, the level of the Christological way of reading is the path into these texts. In the strict sense, this way of reading goes beyond an exegesis of the Psalms; it is rather something like the Christian Church's existential determination of position in relation to the text of the Psalms. However, I have tried to show that enriching the voices by adding the voice of Jesus Christ does not rob Judaism of these texts, but rather builds on what is common in their readability and enables Christians to access all the other levels (the Davidic level, the wisdom level, the prophetic level) of the Psalter.

*Translation: Sr. Katherine Wolff*