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# Singing the Songs of the Lord in Foreign Lands

Psalms in Contemporary Lutheran Interpretation



SINGING THE SONGS OF THE LORD IN FOREIGN LANDS:  
PSALMS IN CONTEMPORARY LUTHERAN INTERPRETATION

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# SINGING THE SONGS OF THE LORD IN FOREIGN LANDS: PSALMS IN CONTEMPORARY LUTHERAN INTERPRETATION

Edited by  
Kenneth Mtata, Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, Miriam Rose



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# PREFACE

## MARTIN JUNG

This collection of essays contributes to the ongoing reflection among Lutheran theologians on matters pertaining to interpretive practices and theories within the Lutheran traditions. While the first publication in this series, *“You have the Words of Eternal Life.” Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective*, focused on the Gospel of John, this book seeks to explore how we read the Old Testament together as Lutheran churches in our different contexts.

The sixteenth-century Reformation was in part the result of a concerted effort to study the Scriptures, informed by rigorous literary and theological analysis, as well as an intentional engagement with the pressing social issues of the day. No book played a more prominent role than the Book of Psalms since it provided a link between the expression of the ordinary Christian’s existential quest and the hope for God’s deliverance based on God’s promises. It was for this very reason that in his first lectures at the University of Wittenberg in October 1512 Martin Luther reflected on the Psalms.

In his 1528 Preface to the Psalms, Luther says;

Many of the Fathers have loved and praised the book of Psalms above all other books of the Bible...The Book of Psalms has other excellencies: it preserves, not the trivial and ordinary things said by the saints, but their deepest and noblest utterances, those which they used when speaking in full earnest and all urgency to God. It not only tells what they say about their work and conduct, but also lays bare their hearts and the deepest treasures hidden in their souls: and this is done in such a way which allows us to contemplate the causes and the sources of their words and works...The human heart is like a ship on a stormy sea driven about by winds blowing from all four corners of heaven. The Book of Psalms is full of heartfelt utterances made during storms of this kind. Where can one find nobler words to express joy than in the Psalms of praise or gratitude?

In these reflections, Luther affirms the spirit of the Psalms which brings to the fore concrete human experiences such as pain, regret and desperation. But these experiences are not the last word in the Psalms; the last word is, “Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in

a broad place” (Ps 118:5). The message of liberation and deliverance is the final statement for those who in lament find consolation in God’s promises.

I commend this collection of essays to teachers at seminaries, teachers, pastors and all those who may want to deepen their understanding of the Psalms in light of the Lutheran tradition and in response to the various contextual challenges.

# FOREWORD

## KLAUS DICKE

It is a great privilege and pleasure to be able cordially to welcome you to Eisenach on the occasion of the second international hermeneutics conference, “Towards a Lutheran Hermeneutics on Psalms.” The University of Jena very much appreciates the fact that the Lutheran World Federation’s second consultation on global Lutheran hermeneutical perspectives takes place in Thuringia and that our faculty of theology has the honor to host you on your journey toward the commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

Although university presidents worldwide are trained to develop a kind of “my-home-is-my-castle” mentality, I certainly do not regret the one-hour drive from Jena to Eisenach since, for a number reasons, I regard Eisenach to be the right venue for this conference. First and above all, Eisenach is the city where Martin Luther went to school and the Wartburg is where he translated the New Testament into popular German and, among other writings, completed his commentary on the Psalms. Eisenach is therefore not only one of the most prominent Luther cities but also the city where we find both biogeographical evidence for and theological meaning in Luther’s hymn *Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott* [A Mighty Fortress Is Our God].

Second, Johann Sebastian Bach was baptized here in Eisenach at St George’s church. Bach, whose sacred music comprises more than 200 cantatas and represents a Lutheran hermeneutics of its own, was born 21 March 1685. The fact that Bach’s birthday is celebrated annually and that frequently cantatas by Bach, Telemann and others are part of Sunday services at St George’s are expressions of the city’s spirituality.

Third, the University of Jena, which was founded in 1548 as an academic platform for Lutheranism, closely cooperates with the church of Eisenach and with its senior minister as we approach 2017. For example, a symposium on Luther and Bach was held in 2012, and plans are currently underway for a symposium in 2015 on Nikolaus von Amsdorf who joined Luther on his way from Worms to the Wartburg and died in Eisenach in May 1565. Eisenach is firm and rich Lutheran ground.

In the last weeks, I happened to reread some of Luther’s early sermons and writings. It struck me that Luther frequently used the notion of *Erfahrung*, experience. His sermons in particular show that he was a

rather sensitive observer of his own inner life as well as that of people surrounding him and that he took a vivid interest in public life and in nature. It seems to me that for Luther in particular the reading of Psalms was a pedagogical exercise and that he recognized the Lord's will in each and every experience. When I prepared this word of greeting I asked myself what Martin Luther would have said to this week's terrible and apocalyptic weather and Johann Sebastian Bach's cantata "Abide with us, for it is toward evening" immediately came to my mind. I took the CD from the shelf and got the answer to my question. The forth movement of the cantata, a bass recitativo, reads:

Darkness has prevailed in many places.  
But wherefore this has come to pass?  
Simply because the lowly and the mighty have not walked in righteousness  
Before Thee, O God  
And have violated their Christian duty.  
Therefore hast thou removed the candle stick  
Out of his place.

And the final movement of the cantata is Martin Luther's chorale:

Prove Thy might, Lord Jesus Christ.  
O Thou who art the Lord of Lords;  
Shield Thy poor Christendom,  
That all Christians might praise Thee eternally.

With this prayer by both Luther and Bach I wish you a pleasant and safe stay in their city and in Thuringia, inspiring presentations and discussions and that God may bless your consultation.

# INTRODUCTION

**KENNETH MTATA, KARL-WILHELM NIEBUHR, MIRIAM ROSE**

I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word (Ps 119:1–16).

On 3 January 1521, Pope Leo X issued the papal bull excommunicating Martin Luther because of his defiance of both the Pope and the Emperor. Emperor Charles V gave Martin Luther the opportunity to recant his theological position by inviting him to the Diet of Worms, which Luther attended on 17 April after having been granted imperial assurance of safe passage. Luther, however, did not recant his teachings; he was declared a heretic and outlawed but allowed safe passage from the Diet. On leaving the Diet, Frederick the Wise, Luther's friend and protector, arranged for Luther to be "kidnapped" and to be brought to the Wartburg Castle for his own safety. It was at the Wartburg Castle (1521–1522) that Martin Luther completed the translation of the New Testament into the German vernacular and from where, in 1522, he returned to Wittenberg to oversee the establishment of the evangelical church. For Luther, the foundation of the church was the Word of God and the Psalms were among those Scriptures that Luther held in high regard.

The essays in this book were first presented at a conference on the Psalms held in 2013 in Eisenach, at the foot of the Wartburg, a symbolic venue for this conference jointly organized by the Lutheran World Federation and the University of Jena. It was the second in a series of hermeneutics consultations organized by the LWF, designed to create a space for the joint exploration of the Lutheran hermeneutical resources among member churches and related theological institutions and the engagement with ecumenical partners as we move toward the 2017 Anniversary of the Reformation.

The first consultation, Nairobi 2011, concentrated on the relationship between the Gospel of John in its context, the readers in their context and the possibility of using the broad Lutheran theological heritage as a reading lens. It was observed that there was the need to strengthen the ecumenical component and to emphasize the readings' relationship to the spiritual renewal of the church and the transformation of society. This interpretive element was built into the Psalms conference, which brought

together scholars and church leaders from all seven regions of the LWF as well as ecumenical guests.

The first chapter gives an overview of the spectrum within which the Psalms can be read. One of the essays focuses on the Lutheran hermeneutical perspective while the second relates the Psalms of lament to a contemporary context of violence. The second chapter deals with the methodological challenges posed in reading the Psalms, which are not only a part of the Christian Bible but are also being read as sacred texts in Jewish religious life today. The Lutheran perspective gives priority to the Christological reading of the Old Testament as a crucial point for reading the Psalms in contemporary church settings. A Christological reading of the Psalms implies a deeper understanding of who Christ is for us in light of the Psalms. In this we share the experience of Martin Luther, whose understanding of Jesus Christ was further developed and deepened by the Psalms. In his humanity, Jesus carried in himself the human condition in the presence of God. In this human condition we participate. Such a Christological reading of the Psalms suggests a hermeneutical spiral; the Psalms help us to understand Christ as much as Christ enables us to understand the Psalms. This raises the question what such a reading implies for Christian–Jewish relations. Can Christians read the Psalms without taking into consideration other communities with whom they share this rich resource of faith?

The third chapter deals with a number of difficult themes in the Psalms read from a Lutheran perspective. The scholars highlight some important principles of Lutheran hermeneutics which should be taken seriously when reading the Psalms. One such principle is to take seriously the literary form of the text. Such a reading accepts the sense of God's transcendence, God coming to us without our doing anything. Such a reading is also oriented toward the movement of the reader from despair to faith, from loneliness and distance to community with God and fellow beings. The human community of those who read the Psalms this way also seeks to relate the written word to daily life.

The following chapter discusses the reception of the Psalms in the New Testament. We read the Psalms in the full awareness that there is not only one way of reading a biblical book and that the Psalms have been read in different ways within the Old Testament, in Early Judaism, in the New Testament and later, with each subsequent reading offering significant insights to illuminate further readings. As Christians we read the Psalms both individually and as part of the Psalter, as part of the Old Testament related to the New Testament. We also take into account that Jesus himself and the New Testament writers made use of the Psalter testifying to the unity of two testaments. But we also read the Psalms informed by their

historical origins, the history of their reception and theological interpretations and their relevance and meaning for us today.

The essays in the final two chapters relate to Luther's interpretation of the Psalms, with the latter focusing on contextual questions. The Psalms help us to make sense of the human condition by creating a framework for interpreting our experiences. They evince a sensitive description of the human condition addressed in them and are attentive to issues of justice and injustice, violence, conflict, lament and joy. The Psalms celebrate the human condition while they also allow the outburst of yearning for newness of life in God. Especially in the Psalms of lament we recognize the paradoxes of life that we all share despite our different contexts. The lament Psalms are about protest, revenge, anger and a cry for justice emanating from experiences of pain, injustice, suffering, abandonment and rejection. Lament Psalms speak of the experience of the absence as well as the experience of the nearness of God.

The contributions in this book underline the value of reading the Psalms and how the Psalms can contribute to our broader understanding of biblical interpretation. Psalms remain an important section of the Bible through which Christian life can be shaped and challenged. As Christian readers of the Bible we affirm that God speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures of both the New and the Old Testaments. The process of understanding biblical texts reaches its aim when the text becomes effective in the lives of the readers and listeners. Employing Lutheran hermeneutics requires that we pay attention to the manner in which Luther read and subsequent generations of Lutheran interpreters of the Psalms applied them to their contexts while we seek faithfully to speak to our own contexts through the same Scriptures. The Psalms provide both examples and language for individual and communal repentance for sin that alienates humans from God and from one another. In the Psalms we encounter the honest language of concrete human life before God.





# I. HERMENEUTICAL APPROACHES AND CHALLENGES



# LUTHER'S EARLY INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALMS AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO HERMENEUTICS

## HANS-PETER GROSSHANS

In 1525 Martin Luther added a brief introduction to the German edition of the Psalms in which he outlines how the Psalms should be read in order for them to be helpful. He wrote,

Compared with others books of the Holy Scriptures, the Book of Psalms has the virtue not only to teach all kinds of good and to propose examples but to show in the choicest way and to point to with distinguished words how we shall keep and fulfill Gods commandments, that is, how a heart should be which has true faith and how a good conscience sticks to God in all incidences, to be comforted and set upright. In sum, the Book of Psalms is a true school, in which we learn, exercise and strengthen faith and good conscience before God.<sup>1</sup>

Luther further suggests that while many Psalms praise God's truth, justice and Word and thus comfort the faithful, many refer to the cross, the lament, the tears and the worry. For Luther it is obvious that faithful Christians have to suffer in this life. The Psalms describe the way in which the Spirit lives, fights, acts and increases in faith through God's Word and truth as well as how the human flesh and earthly life die, suffer, are defeated and diminish.

Luther regarded the Book of Psalms as being highly instructive and worthy of study. After having obtained his doctorate, Martin Luther's first

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Deutsche Bibel*, Bd. 10/I, 588: "Der Psalter hat fur andern buechern der heyligen schrift die tugent an sich, das er nicht alleyne allerley gutts leret vnd exempel furlegt, sondern auch auff aller feynest, mit auserweleten worten zeygt vnd weyset, wie man Gottes gepott solle halten vnd erfullen, das ist, wie eyn hertz geschickt seyn sol, das eynen rechten glauben habe, vnd wie eyn gutt gewissen sich halte gegen Gott ynn allen zufellen wie es zu troesten vnd auff zu richten sey, Summa der psalter ist eyne rechte schule, darynne man den glauben vnd gutt gewissen zu Gott, lernt, vbet vnd sterckt."

series of exegetical university lectures in the years 1513 to 1515 focused on the Psalms. In other words, he was initially an Old Testament scholar.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his life, Luther continued to work on the Psalms. Notable are his “Operationes in Psalmos” (on the first twenty-two Psalms) from 1519–1521; his second lectures on the Psalms; the “Book of Psalms in German in the Style of the Hebrew Language” edited in 1524; and the various interpretations of the Psalms between 1529 and 1532, such as his interpretation of the first twenty-five Psalms at the time of the Diet of Augsburg during his stay at the Coburg. Furthermore, in 1532 Luther lectured on Psalms 2, 45 and 51; from late 1532 to the end of 1533, he lectured on Psalms 120–134; and from 1534 to 1535 he lectured on Psalm 90. Between 1534 and 1536 he lectured on Psalms 101 and 23, which were to be his last lectures on the Psalms.

Prior to lecturing on the Psalms, Luther had focused on other theologians and philosophers such as Aristotle, Augustine and Peter Lombard as was the usual practice at his time. By 1513, Luther—by now an independent theologian in his own right—while continuing to refer to the writings of other theologians, i.e., Augustine’s “Ennarationes in Psalmos,” also gave his own interpretation of the Psalms. Furthermore, and maybe even more importantly, he developed his own understanding of hermeneutics.

Whereas in Luther’s early exegetical lectures on the Psalms, his new hermeneutics did not correspond entirely to the Protestant principle of Holy Scripture, which he proposed later, the transformation in his understanding of the way in which to interpret biblical texts already becomes apparent.

There is some truth to Karl Bauer’s statement that Luther became the reformer of the church through his new hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Bauer did not recognize the new hermeneutics in Luther’s first lectures on the Psalms and therefore believed that the lectures during 1513 to 1515 do not show Luther as a reformer. Luther’s new hermeneutic becomes obvious in his interpretation of the Psalms in the period between 1519 and 1521 and Bauer therefore believes the major shift in Luther’s theology and hermeneutics to have taken place between 1516 and 1519.

Gerhard Ebeling repudiates this claim and has tried to show that already in Luther’s first lectures on the Psalms we not only see the roots of his new hermeneutics, but also some new elements of his hermeneutics, which become fully developed in his second series of lectures on the

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<sup>2</sup> Luther lectured not only on the Psalms but also on other Old Testament books such as Genesis, Isaiah, minor prophets and others.

<sup>3</sup> Luther “became a reformer through his new hermeneutic.” Cf. Karl Bauer, *Die Wittenberger Universitätstheologie und die Anfänge der Reformation* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Siebeck [Paul Mohr], 1928), 145.

Psalms between 1519 and 1521.<sup>4</sup> According to Ebeling, while Luther only developed his new hermeneutics in the years 1516 to 1519, he already laid the foundations for his reformatory hermeneutics by drawing on traditional hermeneutics in the years 1513 to 1515.<sup>5</sup>

The scope of this essay does not permit me to present my own interpretation of Luther's hermeneutics during the first decade of his teaching career, nor to present Luther's theology on the Psalms. Rather, I shall concentrate on a few elements in Luther's hermeneutics which I understand to be characteristic of Luther's way of interpreting biblical texts in general and his interpretation of the Psalms in particular. When we look at Luther's first lectures on Psalms, these hermeneutical characteristics already indicate the way in which Luther transformed hermeneutics.

## SPECIFICITIES OF LUTHER'S HERMENEUTICS

When reading Luther's lectures on Psalms from 1513 to 1515, three dominant elements of interpretation become immediately obvious. Luther follows the traditional scheme of the fourfold sense of Scripture,<sup>6</sup> operates with the traditional difference of letter and spirit (of *litera* and *spiritus*)—the literal and spiritual sense of the biblical text—and practices a strictly Christological reading of the Psalms.

Luther already points to these principles in his preface to the Wolfenbüttel Psalter. He begins his lecture with,

I will sing praise with the spirit and with the mind also" (1 Cor 14:15). To sing with the spirit is to sing with spiritual devotion and emotion. This is said in opposition to those who sing only with the flesh. And these appear in a twofold sense: The first are those who with an unsettled and weary heart sing only with the tongue and the mouth. The second are those who indeed sing with a cheerful and devout heart but are still enjoying it in a more carnal way, as, for example, taking pleasure in the voice, the sound, the staging, and the harmony. They act as boys usually do, not concerned about the meaning or the fruit of the spirit that is to be raised up to God. In the same way, to sing with the mind is to sing with

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, "Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutik," in Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. K, 1971), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> For this hermeneutical doctrine, see Hans-Peter Grosshans, "Lutheran Hermeneutics. An Outline," in Kenneth Mtata (ed.), *"You have the Words of Eternal Life." Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective*, Documentation 57/2012 (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2019), 23–46.

spiritual understanding. And there are likewise two opposites of these: The first are those who understand nothing of what they sing, as nuns are said to read the Psalter. The others are those who have a carnal understanding of the Psalms, like the Jews, who always apply the Psalms to ancient history apart from Christ. But Christ has opened the mind of those who are His so that they might understand the Scriptures. More often, however, the spirit enlightens the mind, the emotions, the intellect, yes, also vice versa, because the spirit lifts up to the place where the illuminating light is, whereas the mind assigns a place to the emotions. Therefore both are required, but the elevating spirit is better, etc.<sup>7</sup>

After giving some examples, Luther continues,

In the Scriptures, therefore, no allegory, tropology, or anagogy is valid, unless the same truth is expressly stated historically elsewhere. Otherwise Scripture would become a mockery. But one must indeed take in an allegorical sense only what is elsewhere stated historically, as mountain in the sense of righteousness in Ps. 36:6 “Thy righteousness is like the mountains of God.” For that reason it is best to distinguish the spirit from the letter in the Sacred Scriptures, for this is what makes one a theologian indeed. And the church has this only from the Holy Spirit, not from human understanding. Thus Ps. 72:8 says: “May He have dominion from sea to sea.” Before the Spirit’s revelation no one could know that this dominion means a spiritual dominion, especially because he adds “from sea to sea” according to the historical sense. Therefore those who interpret this dominion as referring to the flesh and to earthly majesty have the killing letter, but others have the life-giving spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Already in these introductory remarks we can observe how Luther shifts the emphasis of certain aspects of traditional hermeneutics and thus is on the way to transforming hermeneutics.

First, Luther insists on the historical meaning of the biblical texts. When interpreting the Scriptures, no allegory, tropology or anagogy is valid unless, historically, the same truth has been expressly stated elsewhere. This was not a novel insight since, according to the Augustinian tradition, a fourfold spiritual interpretation always had to be based on both the literal and the

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, “First Lectures on the Psalms I, Psalms 1–75,” in *LW* 10, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5. Cf. Gerhard Ebeling’s penetrating study, “Der vierfache Schriftsinn und die Unterscheidung von *littera* und *spiritus*,” in Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien*, I (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1971), 51–53, where Ebeling shows how Luther conceived of the entire traditional fourfold interpretation of Scripture as being governed by the overriding approach either of *littera occidens* or of *spiritus vivificans*—of killing letter or life-giving spirit.

historical sense of the text. Since biblical interpretation has to be related to the literal as well as the historical meaning of the text, the spiritual interpretation of biblical texts is limited. Luther later abandoned the theory of the fourfold sense of biblical texts and showed a clear preference for the literal meaning of Holy Scripture. But this is not necessarily the historical meaning of a biblical text, which relates the understanding of the text to its original historical context. The positive use of an allegorical, tropological and anagogical interpretation—in its relation to the historical meaning of the text—in Luther's first lectures on the Psalm stands in stark contrast to his later hermeneutics. But, as we can observe already in his early lectures, Luther is already in the process of transforming his hermeneutics toward a consistent preference for the literal sense of the text. The reason for this is Luther's second obvious hermeneutical emphasis in the preface to his lectures on Psalms.

Second, reading and interpreting Scriptures in historical terms only would be as wrong as ignoring the historical meaning of the biblical text. If we avoid both, then, as a result, we might come directly to the concept of the threefold spiritual sense of the Scriptures. Luther illustrates this by describing the various (inner) modes of singing the Psalms. If we regard the Psalms as spiritual songs, then we come close to the concept of "spiritual understanding," as it was developed in the early church with the concept of the fourfold sense. According to this concept, apart from the literal or historical understanding of a biblical text there is a spiritual understanding that may be allegorical or tropological (moral) or anagogical (eschatological). Spiritual understandings answer specific spiritual questions that may be responded to by the biblical text: What does the text tell us about God's salvific action and history (allegorical)? What does the text tell us that we have to do (tropological)?<sup>9</sup> What, according the text, may we hope for in the life to come (anagogical)? A biblical text should not only tell something about the past and inform us about its historical context (and God's presence there), but should present a divine reality which includes the readers and listeners and their respective contexts and realities, challenging them to understand themselves within this divine reality.

Much of the history of Protestant hermeneutics pertains to how we grasp the spiritual understanding of the biblical text in the sense of being struck and moved by the divine Spirit. Already in his preface to his early lectures on the Psalms, Luther tries to identify the divine Spirit and therefore a spiritual understanding within rather than beyond the biblical texts and their literal interpretation. The reason for this is not a general respect for the Holy

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<sup>9</sup> The tropological sense of a text questions the reader or listener and challenges them to take a position (in their lives) in respect to the reality presented in the text.



Scriptures, but Luther's awareness that all biblical texts are about Christ. Or, formulated differently and using a term which was later made prominent by the Lutheran Matthias Flacius, Christ is the one and only *scopus* of the Holy Scriptures. If we assume that all biblical texts, in all their variety, are ultimately about Christ—or at least witness to Christ—then we no longer need different spiritual understandings. Rather, attempts to find various spiritual understandings of a biblical text might result in missing the actual point of the text, namely the witness to Christ. In order to ascertain what a biblical text tells us about Christ it is sufficient to understand the text literally. To avoid misunderstanding: in order to understand a text literally one not only has to read it in its original language but also be aware of all the literary forms (grammatical, semantic, stylistic, poetic, rhetorical).

The fact that Luther understood Christ as the *scopus* of all biblical texts characterizes his interpretation of the Psalms, even if the Psalms are obviously part of the Old Testament. From the very beginning, Luther's concentration on Christ is clear. To the already quoted preface, Luther added the "Preface of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Our Lord, to the Psalter of David."<sup>10</sup> Referring to a number of biblical witnesses (Moses, Zechariah, Peter, Paul), he suggests some general guidelines for the interpretation of the Psalms.

From these we draw the following guideline for this dark, yet holy labyrinth: Every prophecy and every prophet must be understood as referring to Christ the Lord, except where it is clear from plain words that someone else is spoken of. For thus He Himself says: "Search the Scriptures, ... and it is they that bear witness to Me" (John 5:39).<sup>11</sup>

Luther links the point of reference of almost all biblical texts, Jesus Christ, to the traditional concept of the fourfold sense of Scripture in order to avoid a merely historical reading and understanding of biblical texts. By referring to Jesus Christ, biblical texts do not only convey historical information but are related to the present and to the individual lives of the readers and listeners and to the communal life of the church, the community of believers. Therefore Luther continues,

Whatever is said literally concerning the Lord Jesus Christ as to His person must be understood allegorically of a help that is like Him and of the church conformed to Him in all things. And at the same time this must be understood tropologically of any spiritual and inner man against his flesh and the outer man.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *LW* 10, 6f.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Luther illustrates this with further examples:

Let this be made plain by means of examples. "Blessed is the man who walks not, etc." (Ps. 1:1). Literally this means that the Lord Jesus made no concessions to the designs of the Jews and of the evil and adulterous age that existed in His time. Allegorically it means that the holy church did not agree to the evil designs of persecutors, heretics, and ungodly Christians. Tropologically this means that the spirit of man did not accede to the persuasions and suggestions of the inimical flesh and of the ungodly stirrings of the body of sin. Thus also Ps. 2:1 says: "Why do the nations conspire, etc." Literally this refers to the raging of the Jews and Gentiles against Christ during His suffering. Allegorically it is directed against tyrants, heretics, and ungodly leaders of the church. Tropologically it has to do with the tyranny, temptation, and tempest of the carnal and outer man who provokes and torments the spirit as the dwelling place of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

While at this point Luther is still struggling with traditional ways of interpretation according to the threefold spiritual sense of biblical text, he is already on his way to overcome this by directing his understanding of the biblical text toward Jesus Christ.

Third, already in his early interpretation of the Psalms, Luther clearly distinguishes between the killing letter and the life-giving spirit. We already find this terminology at the end of the "Preface to the Glosses" of the *Wolfenbüttel Psalter*, where Luther refers to Psalm 72:8 ("May he have dominion from sea to sea") and points to an historical misinterpretation of this phrase, meaning political dominion ("as referring to the flesh and to earthly majesty") in form of a global theocratic state for instance. Luther says that those people who understand Psalm 72:8 in a political sense use it as a "killing letter" and not as "life-giving spirit."

But in what sense is an historical understanding of Psalm 72:8 "killing"? To seek an historical understanding of this text does not mean relating this text to its past context, but to relate it to history—including past, present and future—as the dimension of human life in which the material conditions of life are organized and social life is structured. This is what is also meant by "dominion." And if the phrase "from sea to sea" is understood only historically then it is also understood politically in the sense that God will install one global political dominion on earth, which is ruled according God's law. Psalm 72 is a song about a king, made just by God, such as people were hoping for.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. 8 May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth (Ps 72:2–8).

The young Luther believed that a political interpretation of this text would not only go in the wrong direction but, even worse, lead to death. It is therefore a “killing letter.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly Luther would have been highly critical of a theological justification of any global empire of one emperor (even if he would be pious) living according divine law (or of a group of people with good ideology or even divine theology).

But why is such an understanding of Psalm 72 (and similar biblical texts) not only wrong but even killing?

First, history has shown that empires striving for pure und true (even divine) justice remain empires with all the negative aspects implied by the use of force and abuse of power. Moreover, experience has shown that this always implies the killing of people. We must therefore conclude that justice (in its political, economic, cultural dimensions) has to be based on freedom. Others may object that the Western concept of freedom kills in a political, economic and cultural sense, at least outside the Western world.

Reflections of this kind on possibilities of an historical understanding of Psalm 72:8 show that Luther’s verdict is correct. Through such understandings of biblical texts we are confronted with “killing letters,” despite the fact that in the original historical context people articulated in this song their hopes for a better, peaceful and just life.

It is not, however, because of the consequences (which may imply the killing of people) that Luther thought of Psalm 72:8, which articulates the hopes of people in a vision of a global theocratic empire, as a “killing letter” when understood in historical terms. For Luther, a historical understanding of a text such as Psalm 72 is “killing” because it is not inspired by the “life-giving spirit.” Luther understood the “killing” dimension of the pure letter as opposed to the “life-giving spirit.” The letter is killing when the reading and understanding of a biblical text is not inspired by the “life-giving spirit.” The absence of life is death; and the withdrawal of

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<sup>14</sup> During Martin Luther’s lifetime, Charles V was at the head of a global empire on which the sun never set.