

# **Psalms and Liturgy: Their reception and contextualisation\***

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## **ABSTRACT**

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*In the interpretation of texts in modern Old Testament studies, a double change in perspective, which has important consequences for the liturgical use of the Psalms, is currently taking place. In the first reorientation, the movement is “from the hypothetically reconstructed ‘original’ text to the text written down in bookform and then to the canonical text”; in the second, the attention moves “from the text to the recipient”. On the one hand, the whole Psalter and its connections with the totality of Holy Scripture are thus increasingly becoming the focus of attention. On the other hand, reception aesthetical, reader-oriented exegesis is overcoming the cleft caused by a purely historical view, in favour of a situational perspective. The article delineates this change and applies especially the first approach to the Psalms. The Psalter then appears neither as a mere lectionary nor primarily as a prayer text, but as a text for meditation. Its technique of the juxtaposition of certain Psalms (iuxtapositio) and of the chainage or concatenation of keywords (concatenatio) opens up new and diverse dimensions of meaning. This is illustrated according to Psalm 103. Its connections to its immediate context are first explained, upon which a few lines of canonical intertextuality within the whole Bible are traced. We are thus lead to recognise a certain multi-perspectivity, reaching from the Sinai pericope to the Lord’s prayer.*

## **1 A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE IN THE EXEGESIS OF THE PSALMS**

In his book “Gespräche über Gott und die Welt”, the rabbi Jeshajahu Leibowitz tells of an episode that pointedly highlights our Christian

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\* Guest lecture at the ProPsalms seminar “Psalms and Liturgy”, presented by the Department of Old Testament Studies at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, 21 August 2003. My appreciation to Hanneke Friedl for the English translation.

handling of the Psalms, which was earlier accepted as a matter of course. He writes:

Every Christian would confirm to you that the book of Psalms is a distinctly Christian book. Sometimes, this even leads to unintended wit. I remember a conversation with two Calvinist ministers from the Netherlands. We were talking in German about the Psalms. By chance I opened the Tanach [the Jewish Bible, the Hebrew books of our Old Testament] at the fifty-third chapter of the Psalms and came to the part which reads, “Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!” I asked the ministers: “What does that have to do with the Christians?” They looked at me as though I were from Mars. But this is an unmistakably Christian Verse! – they said. “Zion” was the church, and the “salvation for Israel” was Jesus<sup>1</sup>.

Naturally, the rabbi has the smiling reader on his side in the case of such a downright Christian monopolization of the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps the reader secretly even holds the rabbinic interpretation of Scripture for the only possible one – when considered from its original text. Whatever the case may be, the incident today might have lost its “unintended wit” and instead makes one thoughtful, not merely because we as historic-critically trained biblical scientists can no longer so easily find Jesus and the church in the Old Testament, but especially because we have recognised that its texts are basically open both for Jewish and Christian ways of interpretation. Moreover, the church and the Jewish community have meanwhile found new ways towards a mutual Jewish-Christian reading of the Hebrew Old Testament. A double change in perspective in the interpretation of texts, which has been taking place for quite a while now within the Old Testament science, made no mean contribution to this process. I will now first briefly inform you about this new exegetical handling of the Psalms and then explain it according to an example from the liturgical practice.

Until recently, the Psalms were mainly interpreted as isolated individual texts belonging to a definite textual category or *Gattung*. This however took place within the framework of historic-critically – and therefore often very hypothetically – reconstructed textual categories. The first change in perspective of modern exegesis now

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1 Leibowitz (1990:114f). I owe the quotation to Ballhorn (2003:241).

moves “*from text to context*” or more concretely “from the reconstructed ‘original’ text to the text written down in bookform and then to the canonical text”<sup>2</sup>. It is only partially true that texts are inherently understandable. In the end, every text defines itself in relation to other texts, and it is only these that assign to the text its specific meaning. Therefore, a text does not have merely one uniquely and solely true meaning, but it rather possesses a palette of different possibilities of meaning. Within the biblical sciences, context as decisive category for understanding is increasingly becoming the focus of attention<sup>3</sup>. In our case this means that we are no longer interested only in the individual Psalm, but – as was especially rediscovered by Norbert Lohfink – in its placing within the whole psalter<sup>4</sup> and in the interrelation in which this book of Psalms stands with the entirety of Holy Scripture<sup>5</sup>. In the end, one can only really understand the Psalms within this inner-biblical discourse, that is, in their intertextuality<sup>6</sup> within the framework of the whole Bible. First and foremost, the canonical writings of the Bible form the context in which we come across any Psalm. Therefore, this canonical context

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2 Lohfink (1993) in recent times was among the first to have thoroughly reflected on this movement or process. His analysis based on the example of an individual Psalm. Zenger (2000), e.g., draws up a short résumé of end text and canonical exegesis of the Psalms. The current debate between exponents of historic-critical and canonical-intertextual Biblical exegesis is sketched by Schwienhorst-Schönberger (2003).

3 I however leave aside the fact that not only the reception, but also the production of literature are products of contexts. These determine the prerequisites that both author and reader have to fulfil as well as the whole means of dealing with literature as such. Furthermore, I confine myself to literary contexts, along with which however cultural and social contexts and their historical variability, too, might influence the understanding of the text.

4 Cf. Lohfink (1999a) for fundamental information. The older literature is also briefly introduced there. Cf. furthermore Zenger (1998) and Auwers (2003).

5 Cf. Zenger (2003).

6 Not being able to enter into the discussion on the different theories of intertextuality here, I use “intertextuality” as generic term for a number of forms of literary reference between texts. These need not necessarily be associated with an authorial intentionality. On “canon and intertextuality”, “canonical-intertextual reading” and its programme for the biblical sciences, cf. esp. Steins (1999:45-102 and 226-235).

especially deserves our exegetic attention, because all other contexts, for example the situation of the origin of the text, its older literary stages, its religio-historical environment, etc., are mere hypothetic recontextualisations. However, the Jewish Tanach, the Bible of the Jewish community, differs in its collection of books from the two-part Christian Bible – apart from the fact that also the Old Testament for example contains several more writings in the Catholic canon. This means that there is a difference even in the canonical context at large of the psalter, in that complex of books acknowledged by either the Jewish or the Christian community of faith and interpretation as their normative textual basis. Because shifts in context bring about changes in interpretation, the fact that the canons of the Jewish and Christian communities have different scopes, necessarily leads to different textual explications. This of course does not exclude that both Jewish and Christian exegetes do analyse the Psalms according to the principles of literary history, that they search for the oldest determinable form and enquire about the oldest possible use of a Psalm, and that they in the process may also reach the same scientific results. Yet, they should not limit the meaning of the text to this archaic primary stage. The original individual Psalm has long received its new context within the psalter and Old Testament, and thereby gained multiple perspectives. Where a canon-oriented exegesis of the Psalms is concerned, Christians should keep in mind not only their reception into the New Testament, but also the variety of interrelations evoked already within the Old, because to us, the Old and New Testaments, being the canonical Holy Scriptures, are one single text. Therefore they have to be correlated as the two parts of the whole in “canonical dialogue”<sup>7</sup>. Only thus do they form the basis of the societal entity called “church”<sup>8</sup>. A Christian reader may therefore draw differently from the pool of potential meanings of a Psalm than a Jewish reader does. As Christians, we are by no means distorting the Psalms when, reading them within the framework of our biblical canon, we associate them with Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, and with the church, because this is already being done in the second

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7 Zenger (2000:249) speaks of “canonical colloquicity (kanonischer Dialogizität)”.

8 For our purposes it can be left out of account that different churches represent canons in different forms, varying in the arrangement of their writings.

part of our canon, in the New Testament. Actually, the Psalms only really become fully accessible to us, when they are explicated within the church to believers in Jesus, the Christ (cf. Braulik 1995). “Liturgical exegesis”<sup>9</sup> is, as a matter of course, always canonical interpretation of the Bible. Indeed, even the origins of the Christian canon stand in direct interrelation with the practice of the liturgical reading of its books (Jörns 1992). Therefore, the implicit recipient of canonical texts is primarily not the individual, but a community of recipients, gathered together for partaking in liturgy: the Christian congregation<sup>10</sup>.

The second change in perspective in biblical studies involves a shift “*from the text to the recipient*”. Methodically, this is called reception aesthetics and the aesthetics of reading, that is, the scrutiny of a text in the process of hearing, reading and repetition<sup>11</sup>. This kind of reading-oriented exegesis does not view the text from the perspective of its origin, that is, not from a “production aesthetical” viewpoint. In contrast to the traditional historic-descriptive exegesis, it is not interested in the author and the “original intent of expression” of

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9 The term is used by Schröer (1995:86).

10 Against the postulate of especially Lutheran canonical theory that canonical texts imply an “inspired reader” (cf. e.g. Körtner 1994), Böhler (2002: 177 n. 35) emphasizes: “Kanonische Texte sind jedoch öffentliche und normative Texte einer Lesegemeinschaft. Der implizierte ideale Rezipient ist nicht wie beim modernen Roman ein Individuum in seiner Stube, sondern die zuhörende Rezeptionsgemeinschaft bei ihrer liturgischen Versammlung (Dtn 31,10f.: ‘In jedem siebten Jahr, in einer der Festzeiten des Brachjahres, beim Laubhüttenfest, wenn ganz Israel zusammenkommt, um an der Stätte, die der Herr auswählt, das Angesicht des Herrn, deines Gottes zu schauen, sollst du diese Weisung vor ganz Israel laut vortragen’. Vgl. Neh 8! Kol 4,16: ‘Wenn der Brief bei euch vorgelesen worden ist, sorgt dafür, daß er auch in der Gemeinde von Laodizea bekannt wird, und den Brief an die Laodizener lest auch ihr bei euch vor!’ Offb 1,3: ‘Selig, wer diese prophetischen Worte vorliest und wer sie hört’). Der Kanonisationsprozess hat selbst die wenigen für nichtöffentliche Zwecke verfassten Schriften präzise zu Schriften für öffentliche Verlesung in der Textgemeinschaft gemacht: Ein noch so frommes Einzelseelchen ist nicht der erste Adressat und implizierte Rezipient des kanonischen Bibeltextes. Die Rezeptionsästhetik, für die die Bibel gemacht ist, ist zuerst eine kollektive. Sie impliziert nicht einen inspirierten Leser, sondern das inspirierte Israel, die inspirierte Kirche”.

11 For the Psalms, cf. Erbele-Küster (2001).

a text, because the meaning of a text is not simply identical with the intent of its author, which in any event is only speculatively traceable. This intent is only one in a series of possible meanings, and at that, not the only or the normative meaning. Neither does reception aesthetics inquire after that meaning which is supposed to befit the text as text, because the unread, unheard Bible text remains mere printed matter until it is received. Only then does it become God's address, does it become his Word. In modern reception aesthetical literary theories, reception is even considered to be a creative act<sup>12</sup> in which the text, functioning as a score with directive markings and the reader, for example discovering and interpreting a Psalm as significant for himself, play together. Such a concrete attribution of meaning to the text in the mind of the recipient is made possible by the multiplicity of meanings of the text, because each text possesses a surplus of meaning – this, of course, within its textual repertoire! – over and above the originally intended point of its expression. Furthermore, it is enriched in meaning by new contexts, that is, by the interconnection with other texts within and outside of the same book, in our case the psalter. In some cases its sense may even become altered. Each new literary and situational context opens new dimensions of meaning, this we have already touched upon. When a reader discovers this inherent multiplicity of meaning within the Psalm itself, this has nothing to do with arbitrary or merely subjective interpretation. This is especially true when the Jewish or Christian reader understands a Psalm within a specific current of tradition and of biblical textual reception, that is, within the interpretational community of synagogue or church. The extent to which the psalter already stood in an open-ended process of the enrichment of meaning in biblical times, and to which it already at that time had been a “breeding ground for creative reception processes” (Schroër 1998: 60), is testified by the Hodayot of Qumran as well as by the psalmic writings of the New Testament, for example in the Magnificat and Benedictus (cf. Lohfink 1990; 1999b), and also the hymns in the heavenly liturgies of the Revelation of John. To us, today, the most important setting in which the writings of the Bible and especially the Old Testament Psalms are read, heard, prayed and thus correlated with our situation, is certainly the liturgical surroundings of

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12 Huizing (2000:24) even describes the “act of reading” as “rebirth”, which is investigated in the “Theology of aesthetics”.

public worship. Reception aesthetics ultimately entitles us to enjoy an intertextuality of the Psalms beyond the boundaries of the canon, an intertextuality with the mystery which is always celebrated within liturgy, within which it especially expresses itself in language and ritual. However, this Christian interpretation is not to lead us to forget that we also have to understand the Psalms in a situation of being *en route* together with Jewish believers<sup>13</sup>. Thereby we are sharing our mutual inheritance, setting the Psalms free for a different “perception” by the Jewish community<sup>14</sup>.

These two forms of reorientation in biblical studies – the dialogue of a text with texts anchored in the canon and with the recipient in a reading process addressing concrete matters of current interest – represent an important development in the liturgical handling of the Psalms. “‘Canon’ means ‘Church-as-recipient’ means ‘literature embedded not only in a historical, but in a literary context that goes beyond the boundaries of a single situation’”<sup>15</sup>. Through the reader-receptor oriented paradigm, those factors which were considered to be insufficient in biblical sciences have been overcome: the commitment to one single original meaning, often iden-

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13 Zenger (2001:esp. 26-31) summarised the “Psalmengebet als Einübung christlich-jüdischer Zeitgenossenschaft coram Deo”.

14 On this reception aesthetical process, which perceives “die Leerstellen der Tradition auf Zukunft hin”, cf. Schröer (1998:63).

15 “Wer ‘Kanon’ sagt, hat ‘rezipierende Kirche’ gesagt, hat “Literatur in einem nicht bloß mehr historischen, sondern situationsübergreifenden literarischen Zusammenhang’ gesagt” (Böhler 2002:169). Canon and reception aesthetical exegesis are coupled by Böhler (2002: 168) as follows: “Der Sinn eines kanonisch gewordenen Textes hängt nicht am damaligen Autor und seinen Intentionen von damals allein. Nur danach aber fragte historisch-kritische Exegese. Der Sinn eines kanonischen Textes liegt auch in der Beziehung zur rezipierenden Glaubensgemeinschaft. Sie hat den damaligen Text neu adressiert und etwa an uns hier und heute gerichtet ... Der Sinn eines kanonischen Textes liegt ausserdem wesentlich in seiner Beziehung zu dem grossen literarischen Gefüge des Kanons, in den die Rezeptionsgemeinschaft ihn eingefügt hat, um ihn über die damalige Situation hinaus aktuell zu halten ... Kanonisierung dehistorisiert teilweise und stellt einen neuen, literarischen Kontext her, der als Rezeptionsphänomen auch rezeptionsästhetisch ausgelegt werden will. Weil die Kanonisierung wesentlich ein Rezeptionsphänomen ist, ist der Kanon als Makrotext nach rezeptionsästhetischen Literaturtheorien auszulegen”.

tified with the meaning intended by the author, furthermore, the loss of the unity of Scripture and finally the cleft that was created by a purely historical point of view. Therefore I now want to revise the conventional hermeneutics of the Psalms<sup>16</sup> to include the current canonical understanding of the psalter and reception aesthetics. In order to do this, I will use two concrete examples, each of which contains both new aspects, and ask: Firstly, what is the psalter really – prayer, reading, or something else? And secondly: What are the canonical dimensions of the Psalms?

## **2 THE PSALTER: NEITHER A TEXT FOR PRAYER NOR FOR READINGS, BUT A TEXT FOR MEDITATION**

Patristic literature may have proved sufficiently that the psalter served neither as a prayerbook nor as a hymnal at the beginning of our Christian liturgy. Like the rest of the books of Holy Scripture, it was above all a book of readings and it was of kerygmatic quality; this prompted the Church Fathers to hold numerous homilies on the psalms. Often, the psalter's textual genre required a cantillating recitation by the lector, or a responsorial performance in which the celebrating congregation participated with a fixed responsory. However, "singing the Psalm" did not change its character: the Psalm as part of the liturgy of the word continued to be one reading among others until the 4th/5th century. The double quality of the Psalms as Word of God, which frequently also includes the eulogical and beseeching answer of man, however already lead to a differentiation in their speech act at the beginning of the third century. A psalmody could serve as reading or as prayer or hymn<sup>17</sup>. The perspective of prayer today to a large extent prevails in the liturgy of the word as well as in the liturgy of the hours of the Catholic church. Therefore, today we have to inquire into the psalter itself to find out which kind of reception it guides us to. Is it possible to infer from its canonical shape how the book of Psalms was used?

Firstly, it is important to realise that, apart from only a few individual psalms, the psalter has been used liturgically neither in the Second Temple nor in the early synagogue. Its widespread circula-

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16 The current state of research was excellently described by Buchinger (2000).

17 Cf. e.g. Bradshaw (1995); Buchinger (1995:273ff). On the hermeneutical scope of this differentiation, cf. Gerhards (1996:178).

tion which, for instance, can be inferred from the numerous quotations in the scriptures of the New Testament, is not based on its use in the service<sup>18</sup>. Knowledge about the Psalter and its popularity is to be explained by the fact that it had been a book of life (Füglister 1988; Maier 1983; Stemberger 1998), nurturing a personal and individual piety<sup>19</sup> both before and after the beginning of the Common Era. In which way, however, did this function? Simply through its being read? Modern biblical research has proved that the psalter is to be understood as a text meant for meditation. Its preamble, Psalm 1, welcomes the user of the psalter as somebody who continuously “murmurs” the “Torah”, the “directives of Yahweh”:

His joy is the Torah of the LORD;  
he murmurs his Torah by day and by night (v.2).

The Hebrew verb *hāgâ*, which is here translated with “to murmur”, does not denote an intellectual reflection (which is how the rendering of the NIV, “to meditate”, could be understood), but it means “to recite, to repeatedly utter words in an undertone”. Jerome translated the verb with “*meditabitur*”, which at the time meant neither a silent inward contemplation nor a discourse-like deliberation. In the Ancient World one would meditate by reciting texts that have been learnt by heart in a murmur. This kind of reciting meditation certainly is a different way of receiving the Psalms than observing them in an objective, distanced reading or than hearing them as foreign, unknown texts. Yet this still does not simply turn them into personal communication with God. Knowing these texts inside out, knowing and reciting them *by heart*, in a way cause them to be born *from* one’s own heart. Therefore they result in a deeper

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18 In contrast to the situation in the synagogal service, psalmody presumably played an important role in the liturgy of Qumran. It is especially the singing of the Psalms that might be associated with the community’s self-image as angel-like priestly congregation (Schuller 2003:esp. 184-189).

19 The aspect of individuality should however not be overemphasized, for the literary form of the psalter is directed towards “Israel” and therefore transcends its mere private use. On “Israel as subject of the psalter”, cf. Ballhorn (2003:247-250). According to Maier (1987:365), “die ‘davidische’ Deutung des Psalms” dominated in antique Judaism; however, “der Einzelne ist jedoch als Teil der Gemeinschaft miteinbezogen, die durch die Davidsfigur repräsentiert wird”.

interaction, in an identification of the reciter with the Psalm or with its “I”-speaker.

Thus Psalm 1 opens the entrance gate to the psalter for the meditator. It then follows from its arrangement that the psalter as a whole is to be understood as one single text meant for meditation. This intention can be recognised by certain literary aids that were built in, in order to have the meditation succeed. The first help or aid consists in the deliberate juxtaposition (*iuxtapositio*) of certain Psalms, thereby skilfully using existing material and lexical correspondences. The texts come into dialogue with each other and mutually act as contexts for one another. Secondly, the chainage or concatenation (*concatenatio*) of keywords, added by a redactor, could also be mentioned<sup>20</sup>. Chainage is brought about by verbal networks – including of course the mutual incorporation of motifs – between adjoining Psalms, but also reaching wider, to their surroundings, even across whole groupings of Psalms. To create such connections, additions were inserted, words were exchanged, whole bridging Psalms were probably even created. Often, the composition is strengthened by a play between loose announcements and their fulfilment in the subsequent Psalms. These techniques create a certain dynamics in the psalter, that leads the meditator from one Psalm to the next. I want to illustrate this phenomenon of the concatenation of contents and keywords to you by the example of Psalm 103 and its neighbouring Psalms<sup>21</sup>.

Psalm 103 is intentionally embedded in its environment<sup>22</sup>. Even the fact that it succeeds Psalm 102, leads to a dramatic dialogue between these two Psalms, dissimilar as they are in content and genre. Psalm 102 is superscribed:

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20 For more details on the following, cf. Lohfink 1999a:148-154.

21 It is indicated individually for each Psalm in the commentaries of F-L Hossfeld & E Zenger in *Die Neue Echter Bibel* and in *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament* as well as in the commentary of T Lorenzin (2000). The composition of Pss 102-104 is connected to Ps 101 as “royal Psalm”, which looks back on the immediately preceding Yahweh-kingship Psalms 93-100. Ps 102, with its vision of Zion (as city – v.14-16 [Hebr.:15-17]) takes up the mention of the “city of the Lord” in the closing verse (8) of Ps 101.

22 Cf. Zenger 1991a, esp. 242-244 for details on the current and following remarks. Furthermore Brunert 1996:257-261.

A prayer of an afflicted man. When he is faint and pours out his lament before the LORD (v.1).

This “afflicted man” refers to David, because the heading alludes to Psalm 142:2 (Hebr.:v.3), a prayer of David, which reads: “I pour out my complaint before him”. Thus, Psalm 102 is the lament of a “Davidic” king, a lament about the destruction of Jerusalem. On a historical basis, it would not be possible to associate such an event with David himself. The lament culminates in the expression of his confidence that God would be gracious, according to his Name, and build up Zion again, so that its inhabitants could proclaim “the Name of Yahweh” to the peoples pouring to the renewed Zion, and also to the kingdoms. The following Psalm, 103, is the praiseful answer of David – here he is explicitly mentioned in the superscription. He responds to the deliverance from the distress described in Psalm 102. David can sing praises only because the Name of Yahweh, of which it was said in Psalm 102 that the peoples would revere and honour it, because this Name in Psalm 103 now proves God to be “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (v.8). Furthermore, the fictitious “I”-speaker, David, turns both Psalms into “messianic” songs.

The dialogue of the two neighbouring Psalms is particularised by an abundance of theologically important keywords (Brunert 1996:255f). I have already mentioned the “Name of Yahweh”. Psalm 102 says:

... your renown endures through all generations (v.12; Hebr.: v.13)

and it trusts: When God rebuilds Zion,

the nations will fear the name of the LORD, all the kings of the earth will revere your glory (v.15; Hebr.: v.16) and that

the name of the LORD will be declared in Zion and his praise in Jerusalem (v.21; Hebr.: v.22).

Psalm 103 begins accordingly:

Praise the LORD, O my soul;

all my inmost being, praise his holy name (v.1).

The verb “to have compassion”, that is only used five times in the whole Psalter, connects these two Psalms in three positions: The certainty that Psalm 102:13 (Hebr.: v.14) has, that

You will ... have compassion on Zion,  
is taken up in Psalm 103 in a central position and doubled into a parallelism because of its importance:

As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him (v.13).

Furthermore, Psalm 103 mentions “compassion” or “being compassionate” twice more (v.4, 8). I want to specifically refer to the metaphor of “dust” (*‘āpār*). It is only found in the fourth book of the psalter, that is, in the grouping of Psalms 90-106, and there only in Psalms 102:14 (Hebr.:v.15); 103:14 (“he remembers that we are dust”) and 104:29 (“when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust”). These three Psalms moreover share both the motif of transience (102:4, 11 [Hebr.:v.12], 23-24 [Hebr.:v.24f], 26 [Hebr.: v.27]; 103:3-4, 14-16; 104:29) and of saturation (102:4 [Hebr.:v.5], 9 [Hebr.: v.10]; 103:5; 104:13-16, 27-28). Yet, enough of examples of connections between Psalm 102, in which the vision of a renewed or rebuilt Zion grows out of a lament and which shows Yahweh as enthroned king, and Psalm 103, that ends with this same image.

Psalms 103 and 104 form a kind of hymnic diptych, the tablets of which are framed by the exhortation “Praise the Lord, O my soul”. This is emphasized correspondingly in the synopsis (diagram 1). The Jewish Midrash on the Psalms therefore considers these two Psalms to be a single composition when it explicitly compares their fivefold call to praise (103:1, 2, 22; 104:1, 35) with the five books of the Torah. Moreover, the two Psalms extensively refer to each other in their point of juncture: Psalm 103:19-22 ends with the image of God, who established his royal throne in heaven and now rules the world surrounded by “his servants”. With this imagery Psalm 104:2-4 commences, now however using cosmological language. This is also the last reference to the “servants of God” in the whole psalter. As Psalm 103 calls for praises on the compassion of Yahweh (v. 4, 8, 13), Psalm 104 calls for praises on his goodness, which gives life to all of creation (v. 27-28). Both express themselves in the “satisfaction with good things” (130:5a and 104:28) and the “renewal of life” (103:5b and 104:30). With its closing exhortation, Psalm 103 announces that which is then extensively fulfilled in Psalm 104:

Praise the LORD, all his works,  
everywhere in his dominion (v. 22a).

The creation hymn following in Psalm 104 brings about this song of praise, spanning the whole cosmos. In this way the trio of Psalms 102-104 is to be read as one composition (together with Psalm 101 and its praise of Yahweh and his royal justice). This composition celebrates the royal reign of Yahweh, who sits on his heavenly throne (102:19 [Hebr.:v. 20]; cf. 103:19; 104:2-3). The celebration takes place against an ever widening horizon – Jerusalem rebuilt (Psalm 102), the history of his people (Psalm 103), the whole universe (Psalm 104). The glory in which Yahweh would reveal himself to Israel and the peoples on rebuilt Zion (Ps 103:15-16), already shines through the works of his creation (Ps 104:31).

Thus a few hints on the way in which “meditation” would take place here, and on the riches of insights and reflections that are evoked in this manner. The three Psalms do rather differ in content, atmosphere and genre. Through their concatenation, however, they overlap and interlink using exactly this rich variety, and this opens new vistas and scopes within which our understanding can unfold itself in different directions. I cannot comment upon the basic *conclusions* that could be drawn from these observations *for the liturgy* of the Reformed Churches, because I know them too little. Perhaps our subsequent discussion could further pursue this question. These insights of modern biblical studies, however, can doubtlessly confirm the degree to which early monastic practice, for example, was true to Scripture, in that the Psalms were recited according to their numerical sequence<sup>23</sup>.

One question still remains: Is Psalm 103 to be understood as an address *to* God, or should one rather speak of a testimony *about* God? And: Which attitude does the Psalm create in the meditator through its “God-talk”? Psalm 103 delineates a “Theology” (God-talk) that has its basis especially in the theophany at Sinai and uses this centre-piece of Old Testament faith as a starting point for its reflection on the Name of God (v. 1), his “being” and his deeds (v. 2). This does not take place abstractly, but in images that are shaped by human beings and that describe God’s affection for them: Yahweh as healer, saviour, provider, friend of life, advocate, teacher,

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23 The degree to which the Church Fathers, too, were aware of this, can for example be seen in the extensive treatise of Gregory of Nyssa, ‘On the Inscriptions of the Psalms’ (1962), in which he depicts the five books of the psalter as steps on the upward way to blessedness.

mother, as the compassionate one, creator, the one who knows, the king (cf. Vanoni 1995:82f). At the core of this “quintessence of impressions of God” (Vanoni 1995:85), the covenant formula or formula of grace is to be found (cf. Metzger 1995). It describes Yahweh as “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love”, which is introduced in Ex 34:5-6 as the revelation of his Name and quoted in Psalm 103:8. I will discuss the further references to the Sinai and also to the desert narratives shortly. It is of note that the Psalm never addresses God himself, even where the human “soul” (v. 1) is ever so close to such an address, which one would actually expect in a prayer. This is true although David, the fictitious speaker, exhorts himself to exclaim praises and despite the fact that the main part of the text develops that which is announced in the introductory exhortation: God himself, his “holy Name” and “all his benefits” (v. 1-2). These are hymnic proclamations and no more, even if the hosts of angels, even if all the works of God are finally drawn into the exhortation to praise. The self-exhortation “Praise the Lord, o my soul”, that frames the Psalm, is an expression of reassurance that the Psalm wants to give to the meditator. For the sake of this reassurance, the Psalm narrates the experiences in faith of Israel, one could even say, they are being presented as knowledge in faith. Strictly speaking however, this still cannot be called prayer<sup>24</sup>, but should rather be called theological contemplation<sup>25</sup>. Liturgy, finally, within which Psalm 103 testifies about a practised faith, becomes a source of theological insight through this very faith.

### **3 A CANONICAL TREATMENT OF THE PSALMS**

Strictly speaking, taking the concatenation of one Psalm with its neighbouring Psalms, its placement within the redactionally composed groupings of the psalter or its superscription as its horizon of interpretation into account, still does not mean that it has been re-

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24 Although Dohmen (2001:328) observes that the Psalm does not contain a single address to God and that the self-exhortation only “indirectly” makes it into a prayer, this remains a short particularising remark, whereas the rest of the article classifies the Psalm as “prayer” without further qualification. Cf. Dohmen (2001:333) for remarks on the function of the reassurance.

25 Thus Psalm 103 can provide the impetus for reflection on the interrelation of theology, faith or the scientific exploration of the same, and liturgy. This was done in more fundamental articles such as those of Schilson (1993); Gerhards (1995).

ceived “canonically” – that is, in the framework of the whole of the Holy Scripture of Israel or of the church<sup>26</sup>. We are still moving within the framework of the psalter and are merely doing exegesis of the end text of one book of the Old Testament. Only when connections within the entirety of the bible are considered, have we actually reached the canonical level. For Christians, New Testament voices, too, belong to this canonical dialogue of different texts called to memory. In this kind of intertextuality there is no definite direction in which the texts have to be read, based on the history of textual development, such as reading from the Old to the New Testament or, within the Old Testament, reading from specific literarily or orally transmitted drafts (“pre-texts”) to the text currently being read (“intertext”). Therefore, not the determination of the tradition history or the history of theology of any specific Psalm is at stake, but rather its multi-perspectivity in the context of the whole bible. I now want to illustrate this canonical interpretation by the example of Psalm 103. To a large extent, it can be called “condensed intertextuality”, the result of the extensive reception of texts from the book of Exodus, especially from the Sinai narrative (chapters 19-34). One can easily find the most important cross-references in the reference apparatus of any well-edited bible edition, where they are written down in the margin or in other annotations.

The formula of grace can already be taken as an example of rich interconnectedness, especially in the adjective phrase “compassionate and gracious” (cf. Scoralik 2002). It establishes a theological link not only to several Psalms (86:15; 111:4; 112:4; 145:8; cf. also 78:38 and 116:5), but also to diverging texts such as Joel’s call to return on the day of the Lord (Joel 2:13), the drama of God’s mercy towards the Ninevites – to non-Israelites – in the book of Jonah (Jonah 4:2), Nehemiah’s prayer of repentance (Neh 9:17, 31) and the Passover celebration of King Hezekiah (2 Chr 30:9). I cannot further go into the suggested lines of correspondence here. In Psalm 103, the formula is connected to the events at Sinai by its context. Christoph Dohmen (2000:93f) even characterised the Psalm as “Sinai theology brought into [indirect] prayer”<sup>27</sup>. The most important intertextual

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26 Against three of the four theses of Zenger (1991b).

27 Cf., however, n. 24 on the classification as “prayer”. It is this article that forms the basis of my subsequent remarks about the Sinai references of Psalm 103.

connections are indicated in the synopsis of the addendum (diagram 1). The Sinai pericope does not only speak about the giving of the law, but also about the gracious loving-kindness God shows towards his people. After Israel's sin of the adoration of the golden calf and Yahweh's turning from the disaster he had announced for them (Ex 32), he reveals his Name in the formula of grace. He calls Moses to himself on the mountain and reveals himself to him while passing before him:

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. ..." (Ex 34:6-7).

Thus the forgiveness that Moses wished for, is realised. In Psalm 103 the proclaimed formula of grace is prepared for in verse 7a. This verse looks back upon the plea of Moses in Ex 33:13 –

If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you.

The word "ways" does not signify the journey from Sinai into the Promised Land, but the way in which God acts towards his people, even when they forsake him. The "way", in the end, is the way of his forgiveness. This central theme of God's willingness to forgive is first developed theologically in Psalm 103 (vv. 9-12), culminating in the image of fatherly love (v. 13), and is then developed anthropologically in further images depicting human frailty and transitoriness (vv. 14-18). As is summarised in the closing eulogy (v. 19), God's forgiveness of sins is the origin and end of his kingdom – in New Testament terms: it is the realisation of his reign.

Apart from the Sinai pericope, there also is a number of connections with the tradition of the desert wandering, that immediately precedes the Sinai theophany. Psalm 103:3, for instance, evokes the self-revelation of Yahweh as "your healer" (Ex 15:26) with the metaphor of God, who "heals all your diseases". With the expression: "satis(fying) your desires with good things", Psalm 103:5a evokes a connection with the gift of the manna and the discovery of the Sabbath (Ex 16) on the basis of its context. The motif of the eagle (or rather: the vulture – cf. Dohmen 2001:329f) in v. 5b probably wants to call to mind that God "carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Ex 19:4), that is, to Sinai. This is all the more likely since the formulation about "keep(ing) my covenant"

appears in the following verse, Exodus 19:5. The same is also found in Psalm 103:18. Thus a few remarks on intertextuality, however still within an Old Testament context. We now turn to points of reference in the New Testament.

Otto Betz (1984) called Psalm 103 “Jesus’ favourite Psalm” because of its message of the mercy and forgiving love of God. This Psalm indeed contains some of the central themes of Jesus’ preaching. The parable of the kind-hearted father (Lk 15:11-32), for instance, can be “understood almost as a narrative development of Psalm 103” (Dohmen 2000:104). Psalm 103 however contains the majority of Old Testament connections with the Lord’s Prayer<sup>28</sup>. Betz even interpreted each petition of the Lord’s Prayer, without exception, in the light of Psalm 103. Diagram 2 shows the correspondences between the two texts, which I do not need to explain separately. The special relation between Psalm 103 and the Lord’s Prayer also exemplifies that which Erich Zenger claims for the whole psalter, somewhat adapting a saying of Tertullian, namely that the Lord’s Prayer is a “*breviarium totius psalterii* (summary of the whole psalter)” (Zenger 2001:24)<sup>29</sup>. I wish to point out only two more characteristics. In the gospel of Matthew, the Lord’s Prayer can be found exactly in the centre of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the New Testament counterpart to the Sinai narrative. That which Jesus teaches in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, corresponds to the “ways” which God “made known ... to Moses” (Ps 103:7). Furthermore: In the Lucan version, Jesus answers the request of the disciples to teach them to pray, with the Lord’s Prayer. He does it in such a way, that “he does not present them with a teaching on prayer, but with a prayer that intimates his teaching” (Dohmen 2000: 103). Thus, in the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, the theology of

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28 Cf. e.g. Vanoni (1995:82-88). This is true despite the fact that Psalm 145, with its theological concept of the final coming of the universal kingdom of God, is likewise closely connected with the Lord’s Prayer. Cf. Kratz (1992).

29 Tertullian refers to the Lord’s Prayer as a “*breviarium totius Evangelii* (summary of the whole Gospel)” (Zenger 2001:24). In the Lord’s Prayer, the norm of Christian prayer, Zenger (2001:24-26) recognises two aspects that also characterise the canonical form of the psalter: on the one hand, its incarnatory-Messianic and Messianic-theocentric perspective and, on the other, its eschatological aim, goal or destination.

Psalm 103 is reformulated into a prayer, into an address in the second person singular.

If the Psalms are meditated in the way that the psalter suggests, and if they are received within the entirety of Holy Scripture, then their literary and situational context will time and again open new, also personal, dimensions of meaning. For this kind of reception of the Psalms, the same applies as it does for the the manna<sup>30</sup>, of which it is said in the late Old Testament book of Wisdom in effusive language:

You gave [your people] the food of angels, from heaven untiringly providing them bread already prepared, containing every delight, to satisfy every taste. And the substance you gave, showed your sweetness towards your children, for, conforming to the taste of whoever ate it, it transformed itself into what each eater wished. (Wis 16:20-21). [New Jerusalem Bible].

And here, too, lies the wonder of the Psalms.

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30 I am indebted to Füglistner (1965:147) for this comparison, in which the complete poetic and biblical meaning of the Psalms is brought into connection with the manna, adapting itself to every need.

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# 1. Psalm 103 – Concatenation of keywords and Old Testament intertextuality

<p><b>Psalm 103</b> (New International Version / NIB)</p>	
<p>1 [<i>Of David</i>]  <i>Praise the LORD, O my soul;</i>  all my inmost being, praise his holy name.  2 Praise the LORD, O my soul,  and forget not all his benefits--  3 who <i>forgives all your sins</i>  and heals all your diseases,  4 who redeems your life from the pit  and crowns you with love and compassion,  5 who satisfies your desires with good things  so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.  6 The LORD works righteousness  and justice for all the oppressed.  7 He <i>made known his ways</i> to Moses,  his deeds to the people of Israel:  8 <i>The LORD is compassionate and gracious,</i>  <i>slow to anger, abounding in love.</i>  9 He will not always accuse,  nor will he harbour his anger for ever;  10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve  or repay us according to our iniquities.  11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  so great is his love for those who fear him;  12 as far as the east is from the west,  so far has he removed our transgressions from us.  13 As a father has compassion on his children,  so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;  14 for he knows how we are formed,  he remembers that we are dust.  15 As for man, his days are like grass,  he flourishes like a flower of the field;  16 the wind blows over it and it is gone,  and its place remembers it no more.  17 But from everlasting to everlasting  the LORD's love is with those who fear him,  and his righteousness with their children's children--  18 with those who keep his covenant  and remember to obey his precepts.  19 The LORD has established his throne in heaven,  and his kingdom rules over all.  20 Praise the LORD, you his angels,  you mighty ones who do his bidding,  who obey his word.  21 Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts,  you <i>his servants</i> who do his will.  22 Praise the LORD, all his works  everywhere in his dominion.  <i>Praise the LORD, O my soul.</i></p>	<p><u>Ps 104:1a</u> <i>Praise the LORD, O my soul.</i>  (Cf. the revelation of the Name in Ex 3:14 and Ex 33:19).</p> <p><u>Ex 34:9</u> ... <i>forgive our wickedness</i> and our sin...  (Cf. Ex 15:26 I am the LORD, who heals you).</p> <p>(Cf. the gift of the manna in Ex 16)  (Cf. Ex 19:4 ... how I carried you on eagles' wings)</p> <p><u>Ex 33:13</u> If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways (cf. Gen 18:19)  <u>Ex 34:6-7</u> ... <i>The LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness</i> (cf. Ex 33:19), maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.</p> <p>(Cf. Ex 19:5 ... keep my covenant ...)</p> <p><u>Ps 104:1b-4</u> O LORD my God, you are very great;  you are clothed with splendour and majesty.  He wraps himself in light as with a garment;  he stretches out the heavens like a tent  and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters.  He makes the clouds his chariot  and rides on the wings of the wind.  He makes winds his messengers,  flames of fire <i>his servants</i>.  Ps 104:35b (= v. 1a) <i>Praise the LORD, O my soul.</i></p>

## 2. “Jesus’ favourite Psalm”, Psalm 103, and the Lord’s Prayer

The Lord’s Prayer	Psalm 103	
Our Father	As a father ...	103:13
which art in heaven	throne in heaven ...	103:19
hallowed be thy name.	his holy name ...	103:1
Thy kingdom come.	his kingdom rules ...	103:19
Thy will be done	... who do his will ...	103:21
on earth as it is in heaven.	everywhere in his dominion	103:22
Give us this day our daily bread	satisfies ... with good things ...	103:5
and forgive us our trespasses	who forgives all your sins	103:3
as we forgive those ...		
And lead us not into temptation	he remembers that we are dust ...	103:14
but deliver us from evil.	who redeems your life from the pit	103:4