

**PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE**

**Praying the Psalms and the Challenges  
of Christian-Jewish Relations:  
Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton**

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton are two of the most enduringly influential figures from twentieth-century Christianity, and their overlapping lives were bound up with what might be counted among its pivotal events. Although Merton came to appreciate Bonhoeffer's writings in his later years, they also represent very different traditions and contexts: Bonhoeffer the academic theologian, Lutheran pastor and participant in the German resistance; Merton the Catholic monk, passionate contemplative and voluminous spiritual writer. Nonetheless, there are intriguing parallels and overlaps, and two of these provide the context for this article. First, both sought through their published writings to foster the renewal of praying the Psalms as a central spiritual and liturgical practice for Christian life, drawing on their own deep commitment to it. Second, both engaged with emerging challenges in Christian-Jewish relations in ways that have subsequently been perceived as insightful and prophetic by some but also as ambivalent if not seriously flawed by others. The aim of the article is to explore how far their practice of praying the Psalms may have shaped and been shaped by their involvement with issues in Christian-Jewish relations, with attention to significant differences as well as parallels. It is hoped that this might contribute to a fuller appreciation of the place of Bonhoeffer and Merton within the narrative of Christian-Jewish relations in the central decades of the twentieth century, while also illustrating the complex interaction between spirituality, ethics and hermeneutics in this area.

## Bonhoeffer on Praying the Psalms

In 1939, Bonhoeffer published *Life Together*, a summary of the teaching that had inspired his leadership of the community preparing for ordained ministry at Finkenwalde, and which almost immediately became one of his most popular works. It includes a powerful exposition of the central place that “*praying the Psalms together*” should have for any Christian community.<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer is aware that not all Christians find this easy, but he is also firm in saying that the difficulty needs to be accepted and experienced. When people “try to repeat the Psalms personally as their own prayer”, they inevitably experience frustration, but rather than giving up on praying the Psalms or settling to say only the ones where they experience a comfortable fit, Bonhoeffer argues that discomfort here is a critical sign, since the psalms we find it hard to pray “make us suspect that here someone else is praying, not we”—and that someone else “is none other than Jesus Christ himself. It is he who is praying here, and not only here, but in the whole Psalter.”<sup>2</sup> He then proceeds to sketch out three vital points about prayer in the Christian life that follow from this cardinal insight: “In the Psalter we learn to pray on the basis of Christ’s prayer;” “We learn from the prayer of the Psalms what we should pray;” “the prayer of the Psalms teaches us to pray as a community.”<sup>3</sup>

A year later, in 1940, the last book to be published by Bonhoeffer in his lifetime appeared: *Prayerbook of the Bible*. It reflected the same fundamental approach to the Psalms as

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works vol. 5, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 53. Much of the substance of what he writes about the Psalms in both the texts discussed in this section is sketched out in the earlier ‘Lecture on Christ in the Psalms’ given at Finkenwalde in 1935; see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935-1937*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works vol. 14, ed. H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brocker, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 386-93.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 53-54.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-58.

*Life Together* in the context of a short overview of this biblical book, touching on more conventional matters of attribution, poetic form and classification.<sup>4</sup> In the section on classification, the longest in a brief text, Bonhoeffer shows how to read each type of psalm prayerfully in relation to Christ: as words to him, about him, spoken by him. We know that he was also starting to work on a detailed exposition of Psalm 119, his “favorite psalm” and a task that he considered “the climax of this theological life.”<sup>5</sup> Although he did not live to complete it, enough of it survives for us to see how far it continues the same trajectory sketched out in *Life Together* and *Prayerbook of the Bible* while also anticipating some of the themes that would be developed at greater length in his final writings.<sup>6</sup> Isolated in his prison cell from the Christian community whose importance for faithful discipleship he had repeatedly emphasized in his writings, he remained as committed to praying the Psalms as he had once urged his students and readers to be: “I read the Psalms every day, as I have done for years; I know them and love them more than any other book.”<sup>7</sup>

The Psalms have a long-standing place in Christian worship and prayer, reaching across different periods, regions and traditions in Christian history.<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly for a Lutheran, Bonhoeffer appealed particularly to Luther both for

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible* in Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in editorial comments in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground, 1937-1940*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works vol. 15, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Victoria J. Barnett, Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick and Scott A. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 496 and 569.

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Meditation on Psalm 119, 1939-1940,” in *Theological Education Underground*, 496-528.

<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground*, 113-14.

<sup>8</sup> Overviews of this subject include William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, with Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010); Susan Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*, vol. 1, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

his emphasis on the centrality of the Psalms for the church's life and for his sustained interpretation of them as words of and about Jesus Christ, and therefore the church's words. This is most explicit in *Prayerbook of the Bible*, which includes a number of substantial quotations from Luther, indeed concluding with one of these. There was also at least one other important influence. During his visits to different communities of ministerial formation prior to taking up the post at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer had spent time with the Anglican Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in England, and sharing in the cycle of the traditional daily office of Western monasticism there made a deep impression on him, with its commitment to regular and frequent recitation of the whole Psalter.<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer was also aware that behind both Luther on the Psalms and the spirituality of psalm recitation within Western Catholicism stood the sources of the early Church, and in particular the monumental work of Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, a version of which Bonhoeffer kept in his study and whose marginal annotations testify to careful use.<sup>10</sup>

What he found in these sources converged profoundly with his guiding vision of the Christian life. In an important passage, Bonhoeffer spells out that discipleship requires us to recognize that we relate to no one and nothing directly, but only through and with Christ:

In becoming human, he put himself between me and the given circumstances of the world. I cannot go back. He is in the middle. He has deprived those whom he has called of every immediate connection to those given realities. He wants to be the medium; everything should happen only through him. He stands not only between me and God, he also stands between me and the world, between me and other people and things.

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<sup>9</sup> Editor's Introduction to Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground*, 54-55.

<sup>10</sup> Editors' Afterword to Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 179-80.

*He is the mediator*, not only between God and human persons, but also between person and person, and between person and reality.<sup>11</sup>

It should be no surprise, therefore, that Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christian prayer should be ecclesial participation in the prayer of Christ, rather than some independent religious activity of our own.<sup>12</sup> Nor should it be surprising that he was drawn to pre-modern traditions of scriptural interpretation—including interpretation of the Psalms—that found Christ in the faithful reading of every text. It would perhaps be equally true to say, however, that his forceful advocacy of “praying the Psalms together” at such a critical point in his own life and in the history of his country stemmed at least in part from a sense that it was in such praying that Christians could nurture and celebrate this sustaining vision of Christ the mediator in all situations, a vision he regarded as vital for meeting the challenges that disciples of Christ were facing day by day in Nazi Germany.

### **Bonhoeffer on the Psalms and the Challenges of Christian-Jewish Relations**

Evaluations of Bonhoeffer's response to the persecution of Jewish people under Hitler have differed markedly, from the presentation of him as someone deeply concerned about their plight and ultimately moved by this to put his own life directly at risk in joining the resistance to the verdict that there were serious gaps and flaws in both his thinking and his actions.<sup>13</sup> How might Bonhoeffer's commitment to praying the

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<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works vol. 4, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Kraus (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 93–94.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Eberhard Bethge, “One of the Silent Bystanders? Dietrich Bonhoeffer on November 9, 1938,” in *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), 58–71; Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Post-Holocaust Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); Victoria J. Barnett, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Relevance for Post-Holocaust Christian Theology,” *Studies in Christian-*

Psalms be relevant to our understanding here? Perhaps the first point to be made is the relatively obvious one that Bonhoeffer was writing the three texts referred to in the previous section at a critical time for everyone caught up in Nazi Germany: the invasion of the Sudetenland, the intensification of antisemitic persecution, the beginning of the Second World War. This was also a time when Bonhoeffer himself was grappling with questions relating to his own vocation—whether to oppose the regime from abroad or from within Germany, and how far such opposition might lead him down paths of secrecy, deceit and support for violent action. Clearly, for him prayerful reading of the Psalms was something of urgent importance to communicate and commend to Christians struggling alongside him to be faithful to Christ in the midst of all this. Indeed, *Prayerbook of the Bible* was the last book Bonhoeffer was able to publish, and the one that brought him into the most immediate trouble with the authorities—despite its appearing to be no more than a short devotional treatise on a much-loved book of the Bible.<sup>14</sup>

Although we cannot know for sure why it attracted such attention, it is clear enough that at the very least Bonhoeffer was rowing against the tide in which Hitler wished German Christianity to be caught up—away from the Old Testament and away from any kind of positive evaluation of things associated with Judaism. His approach to the Old Testament as a whole resolutely refused to give any quarter either to the more forthright antisemitic repudiations of the first part of the Christian canon on the grounds of its overlap with the Jewish Bible, or to the more subtle and apparently respectable analyses of allegedly primitive and inferior elements within it.<sup>15</sup> In a Bible study of Ezra and Nehemiah given at Finkenwalde in 1936, Bonhoeffer taught his students that “The church of God is

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*Jewish Relations* 2:1 (2007): 53–67, <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/1402> (accessed August 28 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Editor’s Introduction to Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 143.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Kuske, *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ*, trans. S. T. Kimborough (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

One both then and today.”<sup>16</sup> There could be no division between Jew and Gentile, Israel and church in responding to the word of God: faithful Israel at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah can be called the church of God, just as the faithful church today can be named as Israel. A year earlier, in another Bible study, focusing this time on King David in the books of Samuel, he asserted: “The people of Israel will remain God’s people for eternity, the only people who will not pass away, for God has become their Lord. God has taken up dwelling and built his house among this people. The church, the true Israel is promised.”<sup>17</sup> The final sentence indicates clearly enough Bonhoeffer’s lack of awareness if not indeed concern regarding what would now be termed the supersessionist character of much traditional Christian teaching, yet the first two were nonetheless singled out for hostile comment by a pro-government journalist in 1936.<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer’s canonical hermeneutic was perceived as a piece of intellectual resistance to state ideology and in particular to its antisemitism.

The particular relevance of Bonhoeffer’s commitment to praying the Psalms in this context lies in the space it opened for such theological positions to become embedded in daily spiritual practice. The Bible study on King David, for instance, focuses on the relationship between David and Christ, summing this up at one point in these terms: Christ “is before David, he bears David, and he himself is the root of David. *Findings:* David bears Christ within himself according to both person and office. Christ is in David.”<sup>19</sup> While Bonhoeffer is writing about David in the books of Samuel, however, he also has an eye on David as the paradigmatic writer of the Psalms,

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<sup>16</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Bible Study on Ezra and Nehemiah: The Reconstruction of Jerusalem, Finkenwalde, April 21, 1936,” in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*, 930.

<sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Bible study: King David, Finkenwalde, October 8-11, 1935,” in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*, 885.

<sup>18</sup> Editor’s note to Bonhoeffer, “King David,” in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*, 893.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, “King David,” in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*, 873.

noting that for the New Testament writers, “Christ was really present in the words of David.”<sup>20</sup> The relationship mediated through Christ in praying the Psalms is therefore not only with the contemporary Christian community but also with their ancient writers and thereby with the whole community of Israel in the Old Testament; Christ “bears” David as David “bears” Christ. That relationship is expressed and affirmed every day of the Christian’s life in the discipline of psalm recitation. At one point in *Prayerbook of the Bible*, Bonhoeffer asks: “Who prays the Psalter?” His answer is: “David (Solomon, Asaph, etc.) prays. Christ prays. We pray.” Christ is at the center: he dwells in David, even as David “remains himself”, and he dwells also in us.<sup>21</sup> As Bonhoeffer had argued in *Life Together*, the mediation of Christ in relationships protects and preserves the unique humanity of each person while also uniting us in profound and unbreakable communion.<sup>22</sup> To read the Psalms in prayerful identification with Christ is therefore to find one’s identity in relation to all who make up the body of Christ, including the saints of the Old Testament, without any absorption or erasure of the distinctiveness of each person. As a spiritual practice it therefore resists the assumption of irrevocable distance between us and the “world of the Bible” promoted by some modern biblical interpretation, even as it also resists any naive assimilation of the biblical world to our own and the detachment of the biblical text from the real human beings who wrote it down and preserved it.<sup>23</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s desire in 1940 to devote his energies as a writer to a meditative study of Psalm 119 might also be viewed as arising in part from a concern that positions in theological

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<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer, “King David,” in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*, 872.

<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 159–60.

<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31–44.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jeremy Worthen, ‘Praying the Psalms in the Name of Christ: Christian-Jewish Relations since Vatican II and a Pre-modern Spiritual Tradition,’ in *Interpreting the ‘Spirit of Assisi’: Challenges to Interfaith Dialogue in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Maria Diemling and Thomas J. Herbst (Canterbury: FISC, 2013), 235–51.

hermeneutics with a decisive bearing on ethical and political activity be embedded in spiritual practice. A debate had been taking place within German Protestant theology during the second half of the 1930s about the relationship between law and gospel, and in particular the place of the Law of Moses in Christian preaching and teaching.<sup>24</sup> This was during a period when Torah scrolls were publicly burned and those who revered them increasingly persecuted. Jewish faith identified the Torah, the Law, as the center of the canon of Scripture; traditional Christian polemic presented Jewish adherence to traditions of Torah observance as stubborn and willful blindness to the gospel of grace. In his writings on the Psalms, Bonhoeffer gives no space to that polemic, without diluting his Christocentric focus. Already in *Discipleship*, for reasons that were primarily about his diagnosis of the situation within German Christianity, Bonhoeffer had sought to overcome a simplistic opposition between law and grace, between faith in God and obedience to God's commandments.<sup>25</sup> The surviving text of his 'Meditation on Psalm 119' shows him determined to hold together an understanding of the Law 'in Christ' and an affirmation of the Law given to Israel as divine gift within the prayerful recitation of this psalm. Thus he stresses the inseparability of deliverance from Egypt—divine salvation—from life 'within' (rather than 'under') the Law; the goodness of life on earth as space for this life of grace within the Law to unfold; and the irrevocability of God's covenant which includes the gift of God's commandments. These themes are to be the matter of Christian prayer day by day, week by week.

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<sup>24</sup> See for instance the record of the "Disputation on Preaching the Law" that took place at Finkenwalde in 1936, including Gerhard Ebeling's theses and Bonhoeffer's questions, in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*, 774–81; the first editorial note sets out the background here. The continuing importance of the issue is indicated by Bonhoeffer's "Theological position paper on the *Primus usus legis*" and "Exposition on the First Table of the Ten Words of God," both written during the war, in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940-1945*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works vol. 16, ed. Mark S. Brocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 584–601 and 633–44.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 59 and 115–20.

As already noted, it is difficult to locate any critique of traditional church teaching about Jews and Judaism in Bonhoeffer's work, or, correspondingly, any recognition of the theological significance of Jewish existence in the present. His commitment to praying the Psalms might have opened a daily space for affirming through identification with Christ the Christian's mediated relation to Israel before Christ and enduring participation in the gifts once given, yet there is no unambiguous evidence that such mediated relation might extend also to Jewish people in their contemporary situation. Bonhoeffer's sermon on Psalm 58 in 1937 sought to enable the Confessing Church in its present political struggles to identify through Christ with the cries of David as voiced in ancient Israel for justice and the overcoming of God's enemies.<sup>26</sup> Bonhoeffer was evidently prepared to find room in the spirituality of psalm reading for the voices of those in the present who were deeply and consciously engaged with life in all its ethical and political complexity and its tragic suffering. Could there be room for distinctively Jewish voices also?

The nearest we can come to any evidence for this is Bonhoeffer's brief, enigmatic comment on the events of *Kristallnacht* to the Finkenwalde brothers in November 1938: "In the last few days, I have thought much about Ps. 74, Zech. 2:8, Rom. 9:4-5 and 11:11-15. That leads deeply into prayer."<sup>27</sup> The other biblical references are of course important, not least for the way they show Bonhoeffer's participation in a much wider movement in the later 1930s and 1940s of rereading Romans 9-11 as a critical text for Christian resistance to anti-semitism.<sup>28</sup> Yet there is something at once more personal and more distinctive in the citation of Psalm 74, which Bonhoeffer

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<sup>26</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditations on Psalms*, ed. and trans. Edwin Robertson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002), 53-66.

<sup>27</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground*, 84.

<sup>28</sup> E.g., Karl Barth, "The Election of the Community," in *Church Dogmatics II/2*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 195-305, a text originally published in 1942; Joseph Bonsirven, Joseph Chaine, Henri de Lubac and Louis Richard, *Israël et la foi chrétienne* (Fribourg: Éditions de la Librairie de l'Université, 1942).

annotated in his Bible with a date, something he did nowhere else—the date of *Kristallnacht*.<sup>29</sup> The verse against which we wrote it was 8b: “they burned all the meeting-places of God in the land.” That short note suggests that when Bonhoeffer prayed Psalm 74 after *Kristallnacht*, he prayed it with and for the Jewish people: he allowed himself to become identified with them, because he gave his voice to speak with them to God. “O God, why do you cast us off forever?”, the Psalm begins. Who are “we” here? For Bonhoeffer, as we have seen, the answer can never be merely “some ancient Israelites,” but nor can it be simply “me.” It is always: the community that hears the word of God, then and now, joined in Christ, in whom I also am united with them and thereby able to pray with them. Here, however, we find a hint—no more than a hint, it must be acknowledged—that the circle of mediated relations in prayerful reading of the Psalms might be extended to include the Jewish people, Israel today as well as Israel in the past, thereby opening up a new kind of solidarity. This would certainly fit with Bonhoeffer’s famous comment recorded by Bethge: “Only those who cry out for the Jews may also sing Gregorian chants.”<sup>30</sup> It must nonetheless be acknowledged that if indeed Bonhoeffer’s response to *Kristallnacht* led so “deeply into prayer” that it broke open the circle of mediated relations to others through identification with Christ to include his Jewish contemporaries as those with whom and for whom he was praying in the Psalms, it has left no obvious trace in his subsequent writings.

### Merton on Praying the Psalms

Merton published two works specifically on the Psalms: *Bread in the Wilderness* in 1953, and a short pamphlet a few years later, *Praying the Psalms*, aimed at Christian

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<sup>29</sup> Editors’ Afterword to Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground*, 573.

<sup>30</sup> There has been some question about the dating of this statement; see Editors’ Afterword to Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 125.

laity.<sup>31</sup> Both reflect in part the growing influence of the Liturgical Movement in North American Roman Catholicism in the post-war period, encouraged by the papal encyclical *Mediator dei* of 1947, and the way that its search for a renewal of worship out of the sources of the first Christian millennium coincided with the emerging fusion of patristic scholarship and contemporary theology in what became known as the *nouvelle théologie* in Europe. The attempts of the Liturgical Movement in the Roman Catholic Church at this point to reinvigorate the communal daily office, comprised in large part of psalm recitation, naturally intersected with attempts to recover the early Christian tradition of psalm interpretation found above all in Augustine, from whose great work on the Psalms *Mediator dei* quoted towards the beginning of its section on the daily office: “God could not give a greater gift to men...[Jesus] prays for us, as our Priest; He prays in us as our Head; we pray to Him as our God...we recognize in Him our voice and His voice in us.”<sup>32</sup>

What Merton says about the Psalms in these two texts from the 1950s belongs very much within this wider context, and it should come as no surprise that he cites *Mediator dei* in both directly.<sup>33</sup> Merton dedicated *Bread in the Wilderness* to Jean Daniélou, a French Dominican associated with the *nouvelle théologie*, and draws on his distinction between typology and allegory in Patristic exegesis to explain and defend the kind of identification between the ancient writers of the Psalms, Christ our high priest and the Church in every age on which, as we have already seen, the Christian practice of praying the Psalms in Christ had depended.<sup>34</sup> Yet we can also hear

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (London: Catholic Book Club, 1953); *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1956).

<sup>32</sup> *Mediator Dei: Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on the Sacred Liturgy*, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_20111947\\_mediator-dei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20111947_mediator-dei_en.html) (accessed August 10 2013), § 144, citing Augustine’s exposition of Psalm 86 (Psalm 85 in Vulgate numbering).

<sup>33</sup> E.g., Merton, *Bread*, 38–39; *Praying the Psalms*, 16–17.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., Merton, *Bread*, 20–27 and 58–60.

in these texts concerns that are more specific to Merton and intersect with his other writings from the period. *Bread in the Wilderness* in particular relates the praying of the Psalms to two interlinking themes that run through his work as a whole: the call to contemplation, and losing and finding the self.

Merton writes at some length about the relationship between liturgy and contemplation before sketching out an understanding of praying the psalms as participation in Christ's passage from death to resurrection.<sup>35</sup> A focus on the paschal meaning of all Christian worship was characteristic of much of the work of the Liturgical Movement at this point, but Merton articulates this in terms of entering the darkness of contemplation as integral to praying the Psalms within the Church's daily services. At one point, deploying the language of Eucharistic change in Catholic tradition, he refers to "a kind of transubstantiation" taking place when Christians pray the psalms, and then explicates this in terms of "God's discovery of Himself in His own Psalm." What Merton has in mind here is that the prayer in which Christians come to participate by praying the Psalms in Christ is a prayer that belongs within the life of the Holy Trinity, flowing from the sending of the Son and the Spirit into the world. Recognizing this becomes "a new awakening to our own divine sonship."<sup>36</sup> In a later chapter, he uses more conventional and ecclesial language to describe the discovery that "there is so to speak 'One mystical Person,' after all, chanting the Psalms:" Christ sings them in us, and we are united with the whole Church in every age by singing them in him. While quotations from Augustine are used to show such insights are rooted in authoritative tradition, we also hear the distinctive accents of the twentieth century when Merton concludes that by sharing in the Psalms in this way "we are melted down to become a 'new creature' with a new identity, a higher 'personality,'" and speaks of "the discovery of our true selves, our own inviolable and individual beings united without

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<sup>35</sup> Merton, *Bread*, 1-19; cf. *Praying the Psalms*, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Merton, *Bread*, 67-69.

confusion in the One Mystical Person...”<sup>37</sup> Merton was to become highly influential in enabling the “the discovery of our true selves”, familiar enough as a motif in twentieth-century existentialism, psychology and appropriation of the religious traditions of the East, to be reread against the traditions of Christian mysticism and thereby find a secure home in Christian spirituality. His works on the Psalms come from a pivotal period for the synthesis he was forging here and suggest it was forged day by day in his praying of them with his community.

Through his extensive journals, we can track the profound personal engagement with the practice of praying the Psalms that underpins Merton’s relatively slender published output on this subject. For instance, in 1949 he writes of chanting a Psalm in the night office: “I felt as if I were chanting something I myself had written. It is more my own than any of my own poems.” He develops this reflection, however, towards the territory of identification and union that was discussed in the previous paragraph: “This is the secret of the psalms. Our identity is hidden in them. In them we find ourselves and God. In these fragments he has revealed not only Himself to us but ourselves to Him.”<sup>38</sup> Six months later, the discovery remains fresh: “I am sorry that it has taken me so long to begin to discover the psalms. I am sorry that I have not lived in them.”<sup>39</sup> After more than twenty five years, he is still finding new insights in the Psalms he has been praying continually throughout that time; it is not a practice that grows stale or that he associates with an earlier phase of his Christian life.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 86–87.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo, Journals of Thomas Merton vol. 2 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 383–84.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 420.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. Christine M. Bochen, Journals of Thomas Merton vol. 6 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 170.

## Merton on the Psalms and the Challenges of Christian-Jewish Relations

Merton, like Bonhoeffer, has attracted contrasting evaluations in terms of his contribution to overcoming Christian anti-Judaism and developing a more constructive Christian approach to relations with Judaism.<sup>41</sup> There is, however, one aspect of Merton's response to the challenges of Christian-Jewish relations that has no obvious parallel in Bonhoeffer. There are a handful of occasions when he appears to claim a personal identification with Judaism that is bound to strike us, with hindsight, as somewhat questionable. On the one hand, it can be read as an expression of Merton's passionate enthusiasm for the causes and people that engaged his attention at any particular point, and indeed of the widely recognized "ventriloquial" tendency of his correspondence in particular.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, it can also be heard as a collapsing of distinctions and a refusal to recognize the otherness of Judaism, reflecting the historic inability of Christianity to acknowledge the positive value of Jewish life as something inherently inassimilable to the Church.<sup>43</sup> For our purposes, however, what is particularly interesting is the way that in at least three of these cases, the strange kinship with living Judaism claimed by Merton clearly has some kind of relationship to his reading of the Psalms. Indeed, a close examination of these texts suggests that we need to understand this identification as both arising from and feeding back into the processes of spiritual identification that, as we have seen in the preceding section, Merton learnt from the Western Catholic tradition of psalm interpretation and was developing in distinctive ways.

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<sup>41</sup> For a range of views on Merton and Judaism, see the essays assembled in Beatrice Bruteau, ed., *Merton and Judaism: Recognition, Repentance, and Renewal: Holiness in Words*, (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2013), 66.

<sup>43</sup> Karl A. Plank, "The Eclipse of Difference: Merton's Encounter with Judaism," in *Merton and Judaism*, ed. Bruteau, 67-82.

The first of these three passages occurs in Merton's Journal entry for 24 October 1957, which begins: "One has either got to be a Jew or stop reading the bible."<sup>44</sup> It is an arresting statement, and Merton used it together with the first paragraph of his entry here for a passage in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, published some years later in 1965.<sup>45</sup> Although Merton could appeal to the famous comment of Pius XI from 1938 that "Spiritually, we are all Semites," it is not entirely clear what he really has in mind when he says one has to "be a Jew" in order to read the Bible. He writes that "The New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old, not its destruction. The fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, the promises Abraham believed in." It would seem that at least part of what he is trying to do here is argue that the traditional promise-fulfillment exegesis of Christianity in fact leaves no room for Christian anti-Judaism (contrary to many more recent commentators who find a direct connection between the two). It is likely, moreover that one of the things in his mind here is the defense of typology he had encountered in Daniélou's work, as mentioned above, which contrasted it (positively) with allegory precisely in that the reality of the "type" remains and is not dissolved or obscured by that which it foreshadows. Fulfillment, on this basis, cannot mean "destruction" of what it fulfills but rather must sustain and affirm it as ineradicably real and true. Yet the question that arises from any such perspective is what part the continuing existence of the Jewish people has to play in the "fulfillment of the promises to Abraham." At this point, Merton aligns himself with a succession of Christian thinkers struggling with antisemitism in the first half of the twentieth century—including Barth, Maritain, Berdyaev and Bloy—who found Christian theological meaning in Jewish suffering, as the ground for eliciting specifically Christian concern to address that: "Hence, the terrible

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, Journals of Thomas Merton vol. 3 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 127-28.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, second edition (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), 13.

mystery of the persecution of Israel in our time. *Salus ex Judaeis*. [Salvation comes from the Jews.] Christ crucified again in His people ‘according to the flesh.’”<sup>46</sup>

In the final part of this dense journal entry we can also see something rather different taking shape in Merton’s thought, and it is surely significant that it does so in relation to the Psalms. He reprises his opening statement to ask: “How can we sing the psalms, or understand them, if we are not Jews?”<sup>47</sup> If we need to “be a Jew” to read the Bible, surely we must be Jews to sing the Psalms—the practice that for Merton is at the heart of the Church’s daily prayer. He is aware that there is a conventional contrast in Christian literature, reaching back to 2 Corinthians 3, between Jewish reading of shared Scriptures “according to the flesh” and Christian reading “according to the Spirit”, yet now finds something unsatisfactory about this: “Yes, but one can get too far away from the suffering and yearning of Israel in the flesh and these are inseparable from the Spirit. I think for example of Koestler and the Zionists.” This is clearly a point that stayed with him, for he reiterates it in his entry for the next day, together with a third claim about the need for Jewish identification on the part of Christians: “The Psalms—they are something special when read through Zionist glasses. As I say, one has to sing them as a Jew, or not at all.”<sup>48</sup>

We cannot say with confidence whether it was the juxtaposition of praying the Psalms with reading Koestler’s *Thieves in the Night* that prompted Merton to reflect on some of the core issues for twentieth-century Christian engagement with Judaism and anti-Judaism in October 1957, or whether it

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<sup>46</sup> Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 127; Merton was evidently reading Bloy, including *Le Salut par les Juifs*, in 1941; see Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. Patrick Hart, Journals of Thomas Merton vol. 1 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 386.

<sup>47</sup> Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 128. Cf. Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, 12: to appreciate the Psalms, “We must be, to some extent, ‘Orientals.’”

<sup>48</sup> Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 128–29.

was rather that reflection which led him to dwell on the juxtaposition, but the two are clearly related. Because he was committed to praying the Psalms in Christ day by day, he connected potentially speculative questions about Israel and the Church to the meaning embedded in this spiritual practice. Similarly, when his keeping abreast of modern fiction prompts him to become aware of the reality of Zionism and what is happening in the State of Israel, he immediately wants to ask: what happens if I let this perspective into the way I read and pray the Psalms? What if I allow the contemporary realities of Judaism to be expressed in my appreciation of the Church's Old Testament, to let them stand as that which seeks fulfillment alongside that which brings it as inseparable dimensions of divine revelation in the present? The otherness of the Zionism he reads about in Koestler awakens an awareness not just of the otherness of Jewish experience since the New Testament but also of the otherness of ancient Israel, and a sense that the two are connected in such a way that if Christians are to feel their way into the "flesh" of their Old Testament, without which there can be no New and no "spirit," then they will best be able to do that by nurturing an imaginative empathy with Jews in the world today: hence "One has either got to be a Jew or stop reading the bible." Crucially, as the entry develops this identification no longer centers on Jewish suffering somehow figuring the suffering of Christ but rather on how Jewish living—including the return to the land of Israel—continues to express the promise made to Abraham.

Merton's openness to learning about and from living Judaism is expressed most powerfully in his correspondence. Yet here the troubling but powerful motif of a personal identification with Judaism emerges still more sharply. Writing in 1961 to one of the leading intellectuals for the American left, Erich Fromm, who was himself Jewish though had long since ceased to be observant, of "this great insidious force that has the whole world by its neck," Merton breaks off from his analysis of resisting violence in a nuclear age to exclaim:

The situation certainly makes the psalms we chant in choir each day most eloquent. Erich, I am a complete Jew as far as that goes: I am steeped in the experience of bafflement, compunction and wonder which is the experience of those who have been rescued from tyranny, only to renounce freedom and in confusion and subjection to worse tyrants, through infidelity to the Lord.<sup>49</sup>

Clearly for Merton as for Bonhoeffer, praying the Psalms was not something detached from the struggle for peace and justice in the world; rather, it was a place where prayer for that struggle could be made, where in the light of prayer that struggle could be interpreted and where strength could be renewed to sustain it. In Christ, the words of ancient Israel become our words: both would agree on that, but it is only Merton who could leap from that point to saying “I am a complete Jew as far as that goes”—to identifying with what he perceives as a characteristically Jewish way of holding together the reality of freedom as divine deliverance and the reality of slavery as a state to which we keep returning. “This is still the clear experience of the Jews, as it ought to be of the Christians, except that we are too sure of our freedom and too sure we could never alienate it.”<sup>50</sup> Here as in an important passage on antisemitism in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton rather uneasily straddles two different registers of Christian discourse about Judaism: one which discerns in Christian anti-Judaism a tragic inoculation against self-criticism, a refusal to accept that Christians can be faithless and disobedient because that is a fate projected onto Judaism; and the other which seeks to characterize Judaism since the New Testament in terms of the history of God’s faithless and disobedient (if still beloved) people.<sup>51</sup> The context within his correspondence clearly indicates, however, that it is his prayerful, thoughtful, questioning

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (London: Collins Flame, 1990), 317.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>51</sup> Merton, *Conjectures*, 165–68.

reading of the Psalms as a central spiritual practice that provided him with the space to begin articulating the first perspective, a radically new insight for twentieth-century Christianity, even as it struggles to emerge from the shadow of the second, which has its roots in much older polemic.

A final example of the tendency to identification with Judaism can be found in a letter to Abraham Heschel from 1964, where Merton referred to “my latent ambitions to be a true Jew under my Catholic skin.”<sup>52</sup> The context of the letter is the drafting by the Second Vatican Council of the document that would become *Nostra Aetate*, arguably the single most influential statement by any Christian body on Christian-Jewish relations. Merton had corresponded with Heschel occasionally during the early 1960s, but it was after a visit from him to Merton’s abbey in 1964 that they became effectively allies in trying to influence the text of what was emerging from the Council to express as fully as possible the need for a new era in Christian-Jewish relations. They both feared that an originally strong and positive statement was in danger of becoming irreparably weakened at the revision stage, and Merton’s comment comes after receiving news from Heschel that seemed to confirm this was indeed happening. The difficulty with Merton’s “ambitions to be a true Jew” is not so much perhaps about the elision of distance, which needs to be understood much more broadly in the context of both Merton’s thinking and his personality. It is rather that here as in the letter to Fromm there appears to be a close association between being Jewish and experiencing suffering, in such a way that suffering virtually defines the Jewish experience and the Jewish condition. These ambitions, Merton writes, “will be realized if I continue to go through experiences like this, being spiritually slapped in the face by these blind and complacent people of

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<sup>52</sup> Merton, *Hidden Ground*, 434. On the many areas of overlap between the thinking of Merton and Heschel, see Padraic O’Hare, “Abraham Heschel and the Catholic Heart,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 2:2 (2008): 13–18, <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/1418> (accessed August 28 2013)

whom I am nonetheless a ‘collaborator.’” Not only, therefore, does Merton appear to identify Jewish experience as suffering; he seems to think that his own experience of suffering (and exactly what hardship has been inflicted on him in his hermitage?) entitles him to a share in this Jewish identity he has thus constructed.

Of course, we are reading a letter written in the heat of the moment, and it clearly was a moment of great anger and sorrow for Merton to think that such a historic opportunity to acknowledge past wrongs and move towards truth and reconciliation in Christian-Jewish relations might be lost. Once again, however, even at such a time as this we find Merton trying to articulate a special kind of empathy with present Jewish experience in close proximity to a reference to praying the Psalms. So he concludes this brief and impassioned letter: “The Psalms have said all that need to be said about this sort of thing, and you and I both pray them. In them we are one, in their truth, in their silence. *Haec fecisti et tacui*, says the Lord, of such events.”<sup>53</sup> “These things you have done and I was silent”—Merton is quoting from Psalm 49:21, in the Vulgate translation (Psalm 50:21 in the Hebrew Bible). Once again, Merton finds the light in which present events can be understood in his prayerful reading of the Psalms and thereby the strength not to be overcome by adversity or to accept apparent defeat. More than that, however, he finds there explicitly what we suggested was only at most hinted at in Bonhoeffer, a site of shared prayer and therefore a place of communion: “In them we are one.” Hence when he writes again to Heschel close to a year later, he can close the letter by saying: “I would appreciate you remembering me in your prayer before Him whom we both seek and serve. I do not forget you in my prayer. God be with you always.”<sup>54</sup> As in the previous two examples, Merton’s provocative opening about claiming a Jewish identity in fact unfolds into something much

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<sup>53</sup> Merton, *Hidden Ground*, 435.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

more like solidarity: that Christians—or this Christian at least—cannot be Christians *without* Jews, that Christians must ask for Jewish people to be with them so that they can understand and live the fullness of their own, distinctive vocation. It is not clear, however, that Merton could have reached that point without decades of praying the Psalms, of daily opening up his own identity to a new identity “in Christ” that encompassed the whole Church of God and also kept touching on Israel, indeed could not let Israel go.

## Conclusion

Bonhoeffer and Merton can be seen as transitional figures in the history of Christian-Jewish relations in the twentieth century. Bonhoeffer's theological engagement with Judaism is essentially indirect, reverberations from his mortal struggle against National Socialism and its claims on the life of the church in Germany. Merton, by contrast, becomes directly concerned both with what might be wrong about traditional Christian doctrine with regard to Judaism and with what might be learned from the encounter with living Judaism today. For both of them, however, that engagement is interwoven with their practice of praying the Psalms. It was a practice that inclined them to cherish Israel and all that they associated with it, as bound up, however obscurely, with the mystery of Christ in which they had died and been raised to new life and in which they were daily renewed through their reading of the Psalms. At pivotal moments for their own involvement with Judaism—*Kristallnacht* in 1938, the discussions in 1964 of what would become *Nostra Aetate*—they turned to the Psalms in order to speak truth to God in prayer in solidarity with others. For Merton, that solidarity consciously came to include his Jewish contemporaries; perhaps, though only implicitly and hesitantly, for Bonhoeffer too. Praying the Psalms opened a space for them where, in their different times and circumstances, the spiritual, hermeneutical and ethical dimensions of Christian-Jewish relations could intersect and inform each other, since for them the Psalms were at once the words of Israel, the words of Christ and the words of the Church, which

they were also called to render their words today in the midst of pressing questions and difficult struggles, their daily bread in the wilderness.