

Israel's Participation in the Prayer of Christ: A Response to Olivier-Thomas Venard, OP

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IN THIS RESPONSE to Olivier-Thomas Venard's richly insightful essay, "Literary Mediation of Knowledge and Biblical Studies," I shall attempt: (1) a brief summary of Fr. Venard's central thesis; (2) a critique of some of his arguments against a subjective view of inspiration; and (3) a small contribution to his important project of developing a "Christography." My goal in studying Fr. Venard's text has been one that postmodernists regard as unattainable but about which I am more sanguine, namely, to discover the author's intended meaning. All the same, I found the essay challenging and therefore draw some reassurance from the thought that by setting down his ideas on biblical inspiration Fr. Venard has already accepted the fact that his words "will be misunderstood, or understood in a way other than that which [he] intended" (763–64). I trust that he will pardon any "murkiness" in the following pages.

Summary

According to Fr. Venard, the "linguistic turn" in twentieth-century thought provides us with the occasion for a "deep renewal of biblical studies" (762). With respect to the doctrine of inspiration, "only a careful consideration of what to think or to write really means" will elucidate the precise relationship between divine and human authorship of the Scriptures (766). To begin with, we must overcome modernity's representational and instrumental view of language, with its "dichotomy between things and words" (762), and recognize that in the "oral civilization" that produced the Bible "language reveals rather than represents." The "world" of Scripture is one in which text and reality are

mutually illuminating (771). Fr. Venard goes as far as to say that in the case of biblical narrative language has a certain primacy over history. The inspired text presents a world that is “more real than the real one” (775). By overcoming modernity’s dichotomy between signifier and signified, the linguistic turn in contemporary thought may even contribute to the recovery of an authentically biblical “ontology of text.” When the incarnate Logos says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6), we may be permitted to extrapolate that he is therefore “the signifier, the meaning, and the referent itself” (777).

While Fr. Venard obviously finds promise in the horizon opened by postmodernism, he is not willing to exchange one reductionism for another. Whereas modernity tended to reduce revelation to historical fact, there is the real danger that postmodernity will reduce it to a “mental effect” of written language (778). Where postmodern philosophers might see a non-metaphysical “present” immanent in the text and accessed through “re-enunciation” (that is, reading), we must look for a mysterious and sacramental presence of God’s Word in Scripture and must view the inspired text as the “real place” to experience revelation (779). What Christians take to be divine revelation, deconstructionists will reduce to “purely immanent” and thus illusory effects of language and culture, but according to Venard, by such “linguistic-materialist reductions of religion” deconstructionists saw off the limb on which they sit (780). This is the case not merely in the general manner by which all assertions that “it is true that there is no truth” are self-undermining, but more specifically in that whereas deconstructionism provides no real explanation for the linguistic and cultural phenomena to which it appeals, the Christian dogma of the Word Incarnate presents us with “the deepest grounds for understanding the existence and functioning of language” (781).

This last consideration is not merely an apologetic argument, however. It presents us with a vital exegetical and theological task, namely, the development of what Fr. Venard calls a “Christography”—that is, “a theory of language as a gift of God to humankind, fully unified by the figure of Jesus Christ” (784). This will involve extending the notion of sacramentality to language. In the process of proclaiming “a new, supernatural message,” Jesus also “unveiled the deepest (namely divine) reasons for which usual, natural language works as it does” (784). With respect to the New Testament, “what is told is indeed what permits to tell at all, because actually, in the unique case of Jesus, the person with whom the book deals comes to be identified as God’s Word!” (784–85).

Critique

Thus far I have attempted to summarize what I take to be Fr. Venard's central thesis or proposal, with which I find myself almost entirely in agreement. (I have some reservations about saying that the world of the biblical text is "more real" than the real world, but that is too involved a matter to be dealt with satisfactorily in a short response.) As a corollary to this thesis, Fr. Venard argues against a "subjective" view of inspiration (inspired authors) and in favor of an "objective" view (inspired text). On this issue I am only partially in agreement with him, and I find several points in his presentation vulnerable to criticism. It is to a discussion of these that I now turn.

Fr. Venard laudably wishes to root his view of inspiration inductively in Scripture itself, but occasionally he indulges in sweeping generalizations about the biblical text, some of which admit so many exceptions as to be more problematic than helpful. For instance, one should be wary of generalizing about the sort of "oral literacy" reflected in the biblical text. Not only must we allow for large scale differences in texts from different periods or different major sections of the canon—as Fr. Venard does in contrasting Genesis with the Gospels (773)—but there may be significant differences in this regard even within a single book or passage. For example, within the Elisha cycle, the short pericopes of 2 Kings 4:38–41 (the harmful pottage) and 4:42–44 (the twenty barley loaves) may indeed reflect some of the conventions of oral performance, but note that these stories are nestled between two highly elaborate and sophisticated narratives (the Shunemmite woman, 4:1–37, and the healing of Naaman, 5:1–27). These latter are clearly products of a high level of (written) literacy and literary artistry and betray no hint of an oral mode of composition. Any oral traditions that might lie behind them have been taken up into a literary mode of composition (one comparable in some respects to modern fiction) and completely transfigured.

In a similar manner, in order to emphasize the communal or social dimension of inspiration, Fr. Venard appeals to the complex processes by which the biblical books were composed and then canonized, but here too some of his assumptions should be challenged. First, it is far from clear that ancient pseudepigraphists did not intend to deceive (765). This point is debated in recent scholarship, and one particularly careful examination of the evidence concludes: "It seems difficult to dismiss completely the idea of deception and forgery from the production of pseudonymous literature."¹

¹ Kent D. Clarke, "The Problem of Pseudonymity in Biblical Literature and Its Implications for Canon Formation," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 445. The

Second, while Fr. Venard plausibly suggests that in some cases the meaning intended by compilers and redactors may actually be closer to the divinely intended meaning than is that of the primary author, the example he cites is not well-suited to the argument: “[T]he Hebraic re-writings of some Sumerian myths or hymns are certainly closer to God’s intentions than the original pagan prayers they imitate” (765). If the authors of Genesis have adapted motifs and plot features from Mesopotamian myth, does this justify referring to them in this capacity as “compilers and redactors” and to pagans as the “primary authors” of Genesis?

There is a huge difference between such a case and, for example, that of a seventh-century Judean redactor adding his own intention to the oracles of the eighth-century northern Israelite prophet Hosea. Here we are dealing with more or less subtle modulations of the prophet’s words in order to actualize them in a new but analogous historical context. We ought not to speak simplistically of Hosea as *the* author of the book that bears his name, but neither should we underestimate his central role. There would seem to be a seamless connection between his prophetic ministry and the book’s inspiration, however many authors may have been involved. The creedal formulation “locutus est per prophetas” need not restrict us to the traditional tendency to ascribe the human authorship of the forty-six Old Testament books to a small handful of famous prophetic personalities—clearly many anonymous authors and redactors have contributed to the biblical texts—but it should prevent us from severing inspiration from prophecy and/or uprooting the notion of subjective inspiration altogether. Whether that is quite the intention of Fr. Venard or not, I am not sure. He is, in any case, anxious “to get rid of an overly romantic vision of inspiration as a psychological or noetic phenomenon” (765). I simply wish to ask whether we really want to eliminate this dimension of inspiration altogether.

Third, in my opinion Fr. Venard probably overstates the human authors’ apparent lack of conscious awareness of being divinely inspired. The authors of Isaiah 40–66, for example, seem keenly aware that Yahweh’s Spirit enables them and other Israelites to speak prophetically (cf. Is 40:6, 42:1–4, 44:3, 48:16, 49:2, 50:4, 54:13, 59:21, 61:1–2). But even apart from these and other such explicit statements (for example, Mi 3:8), it is certainly possible, even probable, that many biblical authors consciously experienced the charism of inspiration without explicitly referring to it in their texts. The Apostle Paul is a good example. It is some-

essay by William Adler, “The Pseudepigrapha in the Early Church,” in *ibid.* (211–28), is also relevant here.

times claimed (though not by Fr. Venard) that because Paul expressed hesitation or a momentary memory lapse about which Corinthians he himself had baptized (1 Cor 1:14–16), he could not have been aware that he was under inspiration at the time. I do not see how this follows, unless we assume that Paul himself had a rather simplistic view of inspiration. But in fact, in the same letter, Paul expresses the conviction that he “has the Spirit” (7:40) and that he imparts the gospel “in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (2:13).

What we know of Paul suggests the likelihood that he would have prayed for (and experienced) the Spirit’s guidance when he set to composing an important letter to one of his beloved communities. If the prayerful reader of Paul’s letters may readily experience a certain elevation of vision above the mundane perception of reality and above the “murkiness” of human communication, it seems unlikely that their author did not have an even more powerful conscious experience in composing them. Such an assumption seems to harmonize better with Fr. Venard’s own assertion that “thought is formed only once it has been worded” (763). One can easily imagine Paul coining a particularly apt turn of phrase and simultaneously rising to a new level of understanding of the gospel he has preached for so many years. Would he not have ascribed such an achievement to the action of the Holy Spirit?

Next, I wish briefly to consider whether Fr. Venard, in his sharp condemnation of “historicism” in biblical studies, has perhaps allowed the pendulum to swing a bit too far in a postmodern direction. According to him, “one cannot be more unfaithful to the biblical way of thinking” than to distinguish between “historical fact and its biblical account” (762). But what other choice do biblical scholars have? Is it not necessary to make some such distinction in order to appreciate what the biblical authors are doing and how revealed truth is incarnated in and mediated through their words? Most will agree that we can distinguish between the historical figure of Richard III and the Shakespearean tragic villain. Can we not in a similar fashion distinguish between certain historically established facts about the reign of King Ahab (for example, his involvement in the Battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C., which is never mentioned in the Bible) and the highly selective and humorously polemical account of his reign that we find in 1 Kings?

To sight another example, to interpret the biblical accounts of exodus and conquest found in the Hexateuch, it is helpful to distinguish between this artificial literary schematization of the event (every ancestor of biblical Israel descends into Egypt—“seventy souls”—and 360 years later every ancestor departs Egypt on a single day—603,550 men of fighting

age, plus women and children) and the far more complex historical reality that must lie behind the account. In such a case we can achieve only a very imperfect reconstruction of this complex reality, and we may readily grant that the distinction between biblical account and historical reconstruction is not so much between language and reality (word and thing) as between two different sorts of language, two different incarnations of the event. When we distinguish between biblical account and historical "fact" we are actually "translating" biblical language into modern language. There is certainly the danger that something will be lost in the process, but something is also gained, namely, a certain intelligibility, or at least an important ingredient in intelligibility.

Of course, it is naive to think that we can ever dig down to the bedrock of "objective historical fact," but certain dimensions of the historical reality not accessible through the biblical mode of narration as such may be made accessible to modern minds through a critical analysis of biblical and extra-biblical texts and archaeological data. And it is largely from the vantage point thus achieved that we can then reflect back on the biblical account, appreciate its particular human mode of communication, and benefit from its divinely inspired incarnation of salvific events. I agree that this process must be purified of historicist presuppositions and that the linguistic turn of contemporary thought will be immensely helpful in this regard, but I do not see how the distinction between biblical account and historical fact can be given up altogether. Like it or not, we postmoderns are children of modernity. Postmodernity offers no direct route back to a biblical mode of knowledge. How can we be "faithful to the biblical way of thinking" if we are not also true to our own way of thinking?

Contribution

In this last section, I wish to offer a small contribution toward Fr. Venard's goal of developing a "Christography." My suggestion is that since prayer played a decisive role in the process by which ancient Israel composed the Scriptures under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and continues to play a vital role in the Church's interpretation of Scripture under a corollary activity of the Spirit, we may gain insight into the way in which the words of Scripture and the reading of Scripture constitute an "economic participation" in the Incarnate Word, through a careful consideration of biblical prayers as witnesses to *the act of prayer* as a distinctive mode of linguistic utterance and communication. The point is not, of course, to reduce the mysterious and multi-faceted reality of prayer to its linguistic dimension, but rather to broaden and deepen the way we look at the linguistic phenomenon called Sacred Scripture.

Here the linguistic turn comes immediately to our service. For, while traditional and dogmatic formulations tend to speak of inspiration in terms of what has been “asserted” by the human authors and therefore by the divine author,² we are now in a position to appreciate that “assertion” is only one of a wide variety of linguistic modes or functions found in Scripture. There are also exhortation, commandment, and beatitude, to name but a few. Prayer itself is not a single linguistic mode but a combination of several (praise, expression of trust, confession of sin, plea for deliverance, etc.). The notion of “assertion” might be stretched to cover most of these but by itself hardly does justice to such a complex reality. One sort of assertion is involved in a narrative, another in a prophetic oracle, and still another in a proverb. The very attempt to apply the term “assertion” so broadly raises many interesting questions. For example, what exactly is being “asserted” in a legendary or fictional narrative?

For the present, let us focus on some distinctive features of prayer within the biblical canon. According to an ancient axiom, whereas in the rest of Scripture God speaks to man, in the Psalms man is given words by which to address God.³ There is more to this statement than meets the eye. Consider how it applies to a single line of the Psalter: “To you, Yahweh, I lift up my soul [*nephesh*]!” (Ps 25:1). In taking up these inspired words, the ancient Israelite worshiper (as also the modern Jew or Christian) was drawn into an *act* of prayer, invited to make the conscious and free interior decision that is at the heart of true worship. In other words, “To you, Yahweh, I lift up my soul” is performative speech, inasmuch as an authentic re-enunciation of this line will embody a free human act of prayer.

The *nephesh* (“soul”) is the seat of human vitality and desire. The human person (except perhaps in a state of deep depression) is always lifting up his or her *nephesh* to *something*, that is, directing his or her desire and energy toward some object perceived to be good. And the act of lifting up the *nephesh* will be more or less fully voluntary, depending on whether it is prompted by instinct, habit, or fully conscious intentionality. The psalmists recognized the deeply habitual tendency in human beings to lift up the *nephesh* to lesser goods or even to “what is worthless” (Ps 24:4), whether that be vain idols, unjust gain, or the object of some other disordered desire.

² Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, no. 11.

³ In his polemic against the Karaites, Saadiah Gaon (882–942) denies this emphatically, insisting that the Psalter, like the rest of Scripture, consists of commandment and admonition and only appears to be prayer, but he is able to maintain such a view only by means of hermeneutical contortionism. Cf. Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1–57.

They thus perceived an aspect of the reality that would much later be termed the wound of original sin (*peccatum originale originatum*).

St. Gregory of Nyssa teaches that the *telos* of praying the Psalter is contained in its first word—*makarios* (“happy, blessed”) in the LXX—and St. Athanasius explains that the Psalter contains all the emotions of the soul and that praying the Psalter is a sort of therapy for our disordered affections.⁴ Combining these insights, we can see that man is “un-happy” because he is habitually turned away from God and that the words of Psalm 25:1 draw the one who prays them into a truly therapeutic act. Lifting up one’s *nephesh* to Yahweh is tremendously difficult precisely because it goes against the grain of sin, but repeated conscious acts of prayer gradually “re-form” the habits of the soul. Each such act makes us a little more God-like and thus a little more *makarios*.

Before moving on from this example, let us note how even formal grammatical features of morphology and syntax play a vital role here. The Psalms and other biblical prayers (for example, the Magnificat) often speak of God in the third person, but those passages in which he is addressed directly (second-person discourse) draw us into an even greater intimacy. They embody *prayer* in the strict sense of the word: “To you, Yahweh, I lift up my soul!” This has a special pertinence in the case of Psalm 25:1, for how can one fully lift up the *nephesh* to God without actually addressing God? Psalm 25 would be somewhat less effective if it began simply, “To Yahweh I lift up my soul.” Even the word order is not without significance. “To you” (Hebrew *‘ele[y]ka*) is placed at the beginning of the sentence to indicate that one is consciously choosing Yahweh over all other possible objects to which one might lift up the *nephesh*.

The main point I have attempted to illustrate through a consideration of Psalm 25:1 is that in the case of inspired prayers words are not simply vectors of meaning. They are efficacious signs of *communio*. This may be an instance of what Fr. Venard has in mind when he speaks of extending the notion of sacramentality to include language. But what do the above observations have to do with the specific goal of developing a “Christography”? In the remaining paragraphs of this response, I shall attempt

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, trans. R. E. Heine (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 12, 84–85; Athanasius, *The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980), 108. The notion of the Psalms as therapy for the soul's disordered affections is also prominent in Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. See Michael Fiedrowicz, general introduction, in *Expositions of the Psalms 1–32, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. III, no. 15, ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), 37–43.

to answer this question within the framework supplied by Francis Martin's notion of "economic participation" (touched upon by Fr. Venard on page 783). If I am not mistaken, by coining this term Fr. Martin wishes to build upon "the patristic idea that the deeds of Israel share prophetically and metaphysically in the ontological reality of the Word coming into flesh, suffering, dying, and rising," to which Fr. Venard very briefly alludes earlier in the essay (774). Let us, then, consider the role that scriptural prayer plays as Israel and the Church participate in the mystery of Christ within the economy of salvation.

The Babylonian captivity of the sixth century B.C. seems to have played a decisive role both in Israel's spiritual development and in the production of the Old Testament. It is no accident, for example, that ancient Israel has left us a "Grand Narrative" stretching from creation to exile (Genesis through Kings) but no similar comprehensive account of the postexilic period. After 586 B.C., Israel's history is "on hold," and God's plan for them seems to unfold less coherently, in fits and starts. Even after the initial waves of the *gōlah* had returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, Israel continued to view herself as, in a sense, still in exile. This is evident, for example, in the final lines of the great narrative-prayer of Nehemiah 9:6–37. Here Ezra confesses the historical sins that led to the exile but says nothing of the return. (This is all the more surprising since the prayer is filled with references to Yahweh's earlier deeds of mercy.) Instead he closes by lamenting the fact that, though the children of Israel find themselves once again in the promised land, they are for all intents and purposes "slaves" to the Persians (vv 36–37).

This is one of several exilic or postexilic prayers in which Israel "confesses" two things: the faithful and merciful acts of Yahweh throughout history, and Israel's many infidelities throughout that same history. Though the Grand Narrative is not itself a prayer, the same spiritual and theological impulse of twofold "confession" led to its composition and compilation. It begins with creation and ends with exile, because precisely that stretch of history is coherent and comprehensible. That the postexilic period was far more difficult to get a handle on is reflected by the fragmentary and badly disordered account we find in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the closest thing we get to a sequel to the Grand Narrative.⁵ To a certain extent the Priestly and Deuteronomic theological perspectives enshrined in the Grand Narrative (drawing much from the

⁵ Genesis to Kings is sometimes called the "Primary History," to which 1–2 Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah together form a parallel "Secondary History" that, like the Primary History, begins with creation (cf. 1 Chr 1:1) but extends the story into the postexilic period. Cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An*

prophets) are even able to make some sense of the exile itself (as punishment for Israel's sins) and to offer hints of hope for restoration. But before even such limited clarity could be attained, the exile must first have been profoundly disorienting. This is particularly clear in the exilic prayer of confession found in Isaiah 63:7–64:12. Israel has been so disfigured by the events of 586 B.C. (clearly referred to in 64:10–11) that even Abraham and Jacob would not recognize them (63:16).⁶

This remarkable text, which might be called the “Old Testament Pater-noster,” provides a unique insight into Israel's spiritual condition and the grace given to her at this critical juncture in salvation history. Having forfeited the “sacraments” of her pre-exilic life—the promised land, the Davidic dynasty, the holy city, and the temple—and convinced of her utter lack of righteousness before Yahweh (64:5–6), Israel is able to do no more than cast herself upon Yahweh in a naked act of faith. And yet this is to do very much! The author diagnoses Israel's debilitating malady to be spiritual lethargy, confessing that “there is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to lay hold of you” (64:7). But, ironically, this is exactly what Israel is doing in this prayer. Through the composition of this text—a moment of inspiration!—Israel is being granted a grace of true repentance and of spiritual clarity, and her prayer attains a new purity. Faced with the destruction of that which had seemed unshakable (“our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned in fire,” 64:10), Israel raises her sights to that which is truly immutable (Yahweh's “holy and beautiful palace” in heaven, 63:15). At this moment of utter desolation she rises to a new level of intimacy and knowledge in her relationship with Yahweh, invoking him three times with the words, “You are our Father!” (63:16 *bis*; 64:7). Moreover, this prayer does not simply record one graced moment in Israel's history. Finding a place in the canonical Book of Isaiah, it remains among Israel's treasures throughout the postexilic period and beyond, a sacrament of authentic prayer for any and every Israelite willing to take it up and submit to its discipline.⁷

Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 34. In the Leningrad Codex and some other MT manuscripts (though not in *BHS*), 1–2 Chronicles is placed at the head of the Writings and Ezra–Nehemiah at their end, thus giving at least the impression of a coherent narrative framework to this rather miscellaneous collection of mostly non-narrative books, all of which were composed, or at least compiled, during the post-exilic period.

⁶ According to Eric Voegelin, Israel had thus completed a spiritually necessary “exodus from itself.” *Israel and Revelation*, vol. 1 of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge/London: Louisiana State University, 1956), 494–515.

⁷ Is 63:7–64:12 is embedded within a collection of prophetic oracles, but its isolation is not simply a result of modern form criticism. The Karaite Daniel al-Kumissi

It is no accident that, along with its three invocations of “our Father” (*‘ābînû*), the Old Testament Paternoster three times refers to Yahweh’s “holy Spirit” (*rûah qōdesh*). The author is acutely aware that Yahweh has “placed his holy Spirit in [Israel’s] midst” (63:11) in order to “lead them to [a place of] rest” (63:14) but that Israel in its rebellion has “grieved his holy Spirit” (63:10). Is it a stretch to suggest that he was aware of the Spirit’s presence and guidance as he composed this prayer? Be that as it may, the author’s subjective consciousness is not the real issue here. From the perspective of “economic participation,” and following the lead of 1 Peter 1:11, we may recognize that it was “the Spirit of Christ” that was present to ancient Israel, including the Old Testament authors. In Isaiah 63:7–64:12 we see the pre-Incarnate Son teaching Israel to pray “Our Father . . .” centuries before the Incarnate Son does the same thing in the villages of Galilee. Most profoundly, we see the Spirit of the Son already during the Old Testament period revealing to Israel its true identity as God’s “son” (cf. Ex 4:22; Hos 11:1; Jer 31:9) by drawing Israel into the Son’s own eternal filial relationship with the Father.

If space permitted, many other texts from both Testaments might be brought into this investigation, but let us be content to conclude with a few general remarks about the Book of Psalms. Although the Psalter contains texts from various periods, it is fundamentally a postexilic compilation that seems to have been expanded with new compositions several times during the Persian period. Ultimately, as is well-known, it evolved into a five-book “Torah of Prayer”—a postexilic counterpart to the Pentateuch. The Psalter thus bears witness to the fact that during the postexilic period Israel was drawn (by the Spirit of Christ) more and more to compose prayers and to become a people of prayer. Prayer was the appropriate mode of existence and a significant means of spiritual progress for the faithful remnant during this protracted period of waiting upon Yahweh for the promised restoration.

St. Augustine teaches that in the Psalms we hear the *vox Christi*. The Greek tradition of “prosopological” exegesis (an ancient methodology that, in its attempt to identify the various voices in a complex text, anticipates an important component of modern form criticism), enabled Augustine to distinguish between passages in which Christ speaks for himself (*ex persona sua*) and those in which he speaks for the Church (*ex persona nostra*, *ex persona corporis*, or *ex membris*), and thus to read the entire Psalter as the prayer of Christ.⁸ This is far more than a clever hermeneutical device

of Jerusalem (fl. c. 900) refers to it by its opening words (*hasde yhw' 'azkir*), mentioning it as a suitable prayer for Yom Kippur. Cf. Simon, *Four Approaches*, 8.

⁸ See the excellent discussion in Fiedrowicz, general introduction, in *Expositions of the Psalms*, 50–60.

whereby the Church might expropriate Israel's prayer book. As Michael Fiedrowicz explains, by this profound interpretive insight Augustine's exegesis of the Psalms complements the Gospel narratives with "a view from within" the person and saving action of Christ, thus rendering the Psalter and the mystery of Christ mutually illuminating.⁹ Through the Incarnation Christ enters so deeply into the human condition that he is able not only to speak to the Father on behalf of fallen humanity (*ex persona Adae*) in the very human language of the Psalms, but in these same prayers gives us words by which we may, conversely, enter into the mystery of his person.¹⁰ In praying the Psalter we are able to "insert" ourselves into Christ's "perfect act of prayer" and be "conformed to Christ."¹¹

Augustine's method of interpreting the Psalms had a massive influence on later exegesis and on the liturgical use of the Psalter, but the brilliance and profundity of the *Enarrationes* has perhaps never been equaled, much less surpassed. In the popular Psalms commentary of Cassiodorus (c. 490–c. 580), for example, a decadent version of *vox Christi* exegesis functions as a mere device for the manufacture of Christological readings, some of which are rather farfetched. It may be that this hermeneutic never bore its best fruit because it was increasingly divorced from any serious concern with Israel's historical existence and spiritual development prior to the Incarnation. Even in the *Enarrationes* this is hardly a major focus. In our own day, however, the Church, aided by centuries of historical-critical scholarship and by the linguistic turn, is in a position to remedy that situation and thus recover Augustine's insight at a new level. If we read the Psalms as linguistic sacraments of *communio* bestowed upon Israel, we can appreciate in a new way how they are at the same time the *vox Christi* and a means by which the Church may enter more deeply into the mystery of the Incarnate Word. N·V

⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹¹ Ibid., 57–58.