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“Why do the nations conspire?”

Psalm 2 in post-Biblical Jewish and Christian traditions.

Introduction

The study of the relationship between Jewish and Christian interpretations of Scripture has long suffered from a methodological *naivete*, that was characteristic of the overall approach to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. The direction of the influence between Judaism and Christianity was generally assumed to be one-sided only, from Judaism to Christianity, and not vice versa.¹ This conviction was quite often coupled with the equally naive assumption that this influence could be described as a sort of copying of a Jewish original by Christians.² Undoubtedly, this was in itself a reaction to an age-old theological bias, which considered Judaism as no more than the forerunner of Christianity, or as a promise towards its fulfilment. In reaction to that triumphant attitude, many scholars tended to emphasize the indebtedness of early Christianity to Judaism in general, and in the field of interpretation of Scripture in particular. These scholars felt an outspoken theological interest in and a sympathy for Judaism, whereas others, motivated by the same reaction to triumphant theology, tried to keep aloof from a theological approach to the early Jewish and Christian sources whatsoever. They limited themselves to a historical and philological research, assuming that serious historical research and theology could not go along together. Still, whether this historical approach is inspired by a theological fascination with Judaism or, on the contrary, by an outright distrust of any form of theology, the result remains one-sided, and this even from a merely historical perspective. The undeniable roots of Christian traditions in Judaism do not exhaustively clarify the significance of these traditions in their proper Christian contexts. Put differently, to understand Christianity, it does not suffice to retrace its pre-Christian, more specifically, its

¹ Cf. for the following for instance: A.Y. Reed and A. Becker, 'Introduction. Traditional Models and New Directions', in: A. Becker/ A.Y. Reed (ed.), *The Ways that Never Parted*, = Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 95, Tübingen 2003, 1-33; G. Rouwhorst, 'Identität durch Gebet. Gebetstexte als Zeugen eines jahrhundertelangen Ringens um Kontinuität und Differenz zwischen Judentum und Christentum', in: A. Gerhards/A. Doeker/P. Ebenbauer (Hg.), *Identität durch Gebet. Zur gemeinschaftsbildenden Funktion institutionalisierten Betens in Judentum und Christentum*, Paderborn 2003, 37-55.

² A typical example is provided by the monumental collection of L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, which suffers from a methodological flaw in its purpose to retrieve lost *midrashim* in the works of Church Fathers. The transformations of these *midrashim* to fit the Christian context has not been given its due.

Jewish roots.³ In addition to that, the considerable influence exerted by Christian thoughts and practices upon Jewish tradition, materialized either as unconscious adaptation or as conscious though veiled polemic, tends to be ignored.

The last decades, these new insights, the significance of texts in their proper context and the influence of Christianity upon Judaism, were increasingly acknowledged in research. This has led to the development of more sophisticated models that do more justice to the complex forms of interaction which occurred between Judaism and Christianity in the world of Antiquity on the basis of a common Biblical heritage.⁴

Next to these historical deliberations, a theological reflection remains of great relevance. New historical models which are being developed should be tested for their (unavoidable) theological or ideological presuppositions. Positively, a sound theological approach to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, based on solid historical research, can and should contribute to a better understanding of both religions and to their mutual relationships. By making one's theological and ideological concerns and presuppositions explicit, one may avoid or at least reduce the risk of the pitfalls of unconscious ideologies. Hence, in our view, it is appropriate to combine a sound historical and methodological approach to the sources with a genuine theological reflection upon the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in their formative period.

Psalm 2

The interpretation of psalm 2 in Judaism and Christianity is a striking example of the complicated forms of interaction which took place between both religious traditions from the period of post-Biblical Judaism and early Christianity until the Middle Ages. The psalm occurs in the Dead Sea Scrolls and plays a remarkably prominent role in the New Testament.⁵ Moreover, the text has

³ We are leaving out of account here the undeniable rootedness of both Judaism and Christianity in the milieu of Antiquity.

⁴ Somewhat trendy but basically sound, Daniel Boyarin advocates a 'wave theory' to account for similarities between Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity: D. Boyarin, *Dying for God. Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford, California 1999, esp. 1-21 ('Introduction. When Christian Were Jews: On Judaeo-Christian Origins') and: Idem, 'Semantic Differences; or, "Judaism"/"Christianity"', in: A. Becker/A.Y.Reed, *The Ways that Never Parted*, 65-86. See for a similar model based on the study of Medieval Jewish and Christian Bible commentators, H. Hailperin, 'Jewish "Influence" on Christian Bible Scholars in the Middle Ages', *Historia Judaica* 4 (1942), 163-174. Noteworthy is I.J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb. Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Berkely 2006, whose methodological approach is similar to ours. See also: Idem, 'Easter and Passover as Early Jewish-Christian Dialogue', in: P. Bradshaw and L. Hoffman (ed.), *Passover and Easter. Origins and History to Modern Times*, Two Liturgical Traditions 5, 1999, 98-124.

⁵ See especially: P. Maibinger, 'Das Verständnis von Psalm 2 in der Septuaginta, im Targum, im Qumran, im frühen Judentum und im Neuen Testament', in: J. Schreiner (Hrsg.), *Beiträge zur Psalmenforschung. Psalm 2 und 22*, Würzburg 1988, 85-181; R. Watts, 'The Psalms in Mark's Gospel', in: S. Moyise & M. Menken (eds), *The Psalms in the New Testament*, London 2004, 25-46, esp. 26-29; M. Labahn, 'The Psalms in Q', *ibidem*, 47-60, esp. 54-56; P. Doble, 'The Psalms in Luke-Acts', *ibidem*, 83-118, esp. 102-111; H.W. Attridge, 'The Psalms

continued to be commented upon in both rabbinic and patristic sources during Late Antiquity and even during the Middle Ages. The question, then, arises as to what forms of interactions might have taken place between Jewish and Christian interpretations of the psalm? What makes this question all the more relevant is that the exegesis of this psalm leads us to the heart of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in all its complexity and ambiguity, showing both the common ground of both religions as well as the polemics and the tensions between them, an issue which in turn unavoidably calls for theological evaluation.

While dealing with the interpretation of psalm 2 in Jewish and Christian traditions as an example of (possible) interaction between both religions, we shall proceed in a way which slightly differs from other similar studies. Instead of first reviewing the Jewish evidence, derived from both early and (very) late periods – i.e. from pre-rabbinic times until well into the Middle Ages - and then going back in time to trace the development of Christian exegesis from its very inception in the New Testament period,⁶ we shall adopt a more refined chronology to do more justice to the far-reaching changes and discontinuities in *both* religions – not only in Christianity – over the centuries. After having mapped out the psalm's significance in post-Biblical Judaism (I) – more specifically, in sources prior to or contemporaneous with the New Testament period - , we shall deal with the Christian evidence of the first four centuries, starting with, but not limiting ourselves, to the New Testament writings(II). Next, we shall examine Jewish – mainly rabbinic - sources which are generally later than the New Testament era and can be dated to the Christian patristic period (4th-5th century), if not later (III). While following this chronological order, we will be particularly alert to the possibility of (mutual) influences. In conclusion, we will highlight the harvest of this research for a theology of Jewish-Christian relations (IV).

First we offer an English translation of the Hebrew text to be followed by a brief clarification of structure and context of psalm 2 and of its protagonists.

The Hebrew text in translation(RSV)

- 1: Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?
- 2: The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed, saying,
- 3: "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us."
- 4: He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision.

in Hebrews', *ibidem*, 197-212, esp. 199-203; S.Moyise, 'The Psalms in the Book of Revelation', *ibidem*, 231-246, esp. 231-234.

⁶ This method is for instance followed by P. Maiberger, 'Das Verständnis von Psalm 2'. See also the articles published in S. Moyise and M. Menken, *The Psalms in the New Testament*.

5: Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,

6: "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill."

7: I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you.

8: Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.

9: You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

10: Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.

11: Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling

12: kiss his feet, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 2 and its relationship with psalm 1.

Already the very choice of psalm 2 as a single text raises important historical questions. There is clear evidence that both in Jewish as well as in Christian traditions, this psalm was sometimes considered to form a whole together with psalm 1.⁷ The Dead Sea Scrolls contain a florilegium in which psalm 1 and 2 figure side by side (4 Q Florilegium). When in Act. 13: 33 according to the Western text, Paul quotes the famous verse: "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee" (ps 2:7), he refers to the *first* psalm, thereby showing to be heir to this same tradition,⁸ just as Tertullian,⁹ Cyprian,¹⁰ Hilary of Poitiers¹¹, as well as Justin Martyr who, in Apology I, 40 quotes both psalms as if they are constituting one single text.¹² The Babylonian Talmud seems to convey the same message where it states: 'every chapter that was particularly dear to David, he commenced with Ashrei (Happy) and terminated with Ashrei. He began with 'happy' as it is written: "Happy is the man" (Ps 1:1), and terminated with it as it is written "happy are all they that take refuge in him" (Ps 2:12) (*BT Berachot* 10a).¹³ Likewise, the Palestinian Talmud counts 18 psalms from the first to the beginning of psalm 20, again taking the psalms 1 and 2 as one (*PT Berachot*

⁷ Cf. for the following observations: P. Maiberger, 'Das Verständnis von Psalm 2', 85-89.

⁸ See for the textcritical background of Acts 13:33, B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, London 1975, 412 ff.

⁹ *Adversus Marcionem* IV, 22

¹⁰ *Ad Quirinum* I, 13; II, 8.29; III, 20.56.112, in some manuscripts.

¹¹ *Tractatus super psalmos*, CSEL 22, 50/ PL 9, 279A.

¹² Several Church Fathers make mention of a Jewish tradition considering the first two psalms as an unity. Thus, Origen reports about two Hebrew manuscripts, of which one separates the psalms 1 and 2, whereas the other combines them (*Selecta in Psalmos*, PG 12, 1100; compare: P. Maiberger, 'Das Verständnis von Psalm 2', 85 and 120, note 9). See further: Eusebius of Caesarea (*Explanatio Psalmi II*, PG 23, 73); Athanasius (*Argumentum in Psalmos*, PG 27, 56), Jerome (*Breviarium in Psalmos*, PL 26, 823); Diodore of Tarsus, *In Psalmos* II (ed. J. Olivier, CCSG 6, Turnhout 1980, 17).

¹³ Other Rabbinic sources even count no more than 147 psalms, apparently joining even more psalms together, e.g. 114 and 115, and 117-118 or possibly 9 and 10 (Midrash Psalms 22:19). The LXX notoriously likewise knows of a division different from the Hebrew.

4,3). Apparently, all of these sources are aware of the other way of counting where psalms 1 and 2 are separated.

This at first sight merely technical question of counting may have important repercussions for the interpretation of the content of the psalm. If the second psalm is considered to form a unity with the first psalm, it is quite natural to interpret the latter from the perspective of the former and to connect the whole second psalm with the theme of the Torah or with wisdom. Traces of such sapiential interpretation are to be found in the LXX which renders v.12a (kiss the feet) by δραξασθε παιδειας (grasp the teaching).¹⁴ On the other hand, in that perspective, the figure of the anointed king (vs.6-9) will tend to become less prominent, unless the king, identified with David or otherwise, is presented as a paragon of obedience to the Torah. Conversely, if psalm 2 is viewed as an independent text, the figure of the anointed king will probably come to the fore more prominently. If, then, this royal figure is interpreted as the Messiah, this will stimulate the interpretation of the entire psalm from a messianic perspective.

The protagonists of psalm 2.

Psalm 2 falls into four sections:

vv. 1-3 describe the rebellion of the nations and the peoples and their kings and rulers against the Lord and his anointed;

vs. 4-6 depict the Lord's mockery and his support of the king;

in vv. 7-9 the king himself tells of the decree of the Lord which established him as king and promised him victory over his enemies;

vv. 10-12 conclude the psalm with a final warning by the king (or the psalmist) to the hostile rulers to submit to the Lord.¹⁵

Apart from the author of the psalm, three protagonists may be distinguished, namely the nations and their rulers (section 1 and 4), the Lord (section 2) and the anointed king (section 3).

To understand post-Biblical interpretations of the psalm, it is essential to know with which persons or groups they identified these protagonists. Who are the nations (*goyim*) and peoples (*le`umim*) of which the first line speaks? And do they form one or rather two groups? Although the Biblical poetry of the *paralellismus membrorum* makes an identification of the two plausible, post-Biblical interpretations rather detect in the seeming repetition an opportunity to distinguish two groups, based upon the principle that the Bible never repeats itself.

Then in line 2 we meet 'the kings of the earth' together with the 'rulers'. Again, do they constitute one or rather two groups and how do they relate to the nations and the peoples, mentioned earlier? And who is the subject of the puzzling verse 3: "let us cut their cords and cast off their ropes"? Are the nations and peoples

¹⁴ Cf. P. Maiberger, 'Das Verständnis von Psalm 2', 90.

¹⁵ See C. Rodd, in: *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman), Oxford 2000, 367.

speaking here, or the kings and rulers, or rather God himself and His anointed? And whose cords should be cut and whose ropes cast off and what can be the nature of these bonds? Further, it may naturally be asked who is the 'king', the son begotten by the Lord and His anointed one, who is to receive the nations as his heritage (vs. 2; 7-9). Does this word refer to an individual or rather to a collective entity, to a community or a group of people? And is this king a historical or rather a messianic figure, or perhaps a combination of both?

As we cannot claim to give an exhaustive treatment of the whole of psalm 2 in Jewish and Christian sources, we will focus on the identification of the protagonists of the first section (vv. 1-3) who in vv. 8-9 are subdued by the figure of the king. We shall deal with the others verses only insofar they throw light upon the question as to which rebellious and hostile individuals and groups can be distinguished in this psalm, according to post-Biblical interpretations.

I. Early Judaism

In the period of early Judaism, i.e. in the centuries prior to the beginning of the rabbinic era and the emergence of Christianity as an independent religion, Jewish sources give evidence of a variety of interpretations of psalm 2, which may have some important characteristics in common, but at times also differ considerably.

As stated above, there is a widespread tendency to interpret psalm 2 in light of the preceding psalm, whether it was believed to form a unity with that text or not. This implies that observance of the Torah is considered to be a major key to the understanding of the psalm. Not only the LXX version of this psalm, but, as Paul Maiberger has pointed out, also the Targum on Psalms betrays a similar view on the text: tellingly, versus 12a is translated as 'accept the teaching' (וקבילו אולפנא)! It does not become clear from the LXX and the Targum what this implies for the identification of the protagonists. It may be guessed that the anointed king is understood to be either the people of Israel or king David. The conspiring nations and their rulers were doubtless in some way interpreted as enemies of the Torah and of the righteous Torah-observers of psalm 1.

In a fragment of a document that has been found in the fourth cave of Qumran, the so-called Florilegium (4Q174), we encounter an explanation of the psalm which has some basic elements in common with the LXX but at the same time exhibits some features which are characteristic of the Qumran community. The text of the passage which is of particular interest to our issue, runs as follows:

'Midrash: 'Blessed the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked' (ps. 1, 1). The interpretation (peshet) of this word: they are those who turn aside from the path of the wicked, as it is written in the book of Isaiah, the prophet for the last days: 'And it happened that with a strong [hand he turned me aside from walking on the path of] this people (Is.

8,11)'. And this refers to those about whom it is written in the book of Ezekiel, the prophet, that 'they should not defile themselves any more with all their idols (Ez.44,10)'. This refers to the sons of Zadok and to the men of their council, those who seek justice eagerly, who have come after them to the council of the community. 'Why are the nations [in turmoil] and hatch the peoples [idle plots? The kings of the earth t[ake up their posts and the ru]lers conspire together against the Lord and against [his anointed one]'. Interpre]tation (pesher) of the saying: [the kings of the na]tions [are in turmoil] and ha[tch idle plots against] the elect ones of Israel in the last days' .

This interpretation of (the beginning of) psalm 2 has in common with the LXX and the Targum that the first two psalms are considered a unity, the second being explained in the light of the first one. The just and Torah observing man of Psalm one is a prototype of the sons of Zadok who have remained undefiled by corruption and idolatry and who constitute the community of Qumran, living 'at the end of the days'. It is against this select group of elect Jews that the nations and the kings, mentioned in the first two verses of Psalm 2, are hatching plots. The question then arises with whom these enemies of the Qumran community are identified. There can be no doubt that the pesher refers first and foremost to the Jews who did not belong to the Qumran community and were believed to have become defiled and gone astray. This opens up the possibility of going one step further and hypothesizing that the "peoples" and nations of verse 1 are identified with the (rejected) Jewish people in Jerusalem and the "kings and rulers" of verse 2 with its unworthy priesthood, but perhaps the text is too fragmentary to warrant such a reading. For that matter, the question may also be raised who is the anointed of verse according to the pesher. Is he perhaps identified with the Qumran community¹⁶ or rather with an individual Messiah? Or is the pesher simply not interested in the interpretation of this figure? Unfortunately, the text of the florilegium is too fragmentary and too succinct to allow for any certain conclusion. Anyway, we find ourselves in the eschatological setting of the war between the elect and the wicked which will be the drama of the End of days.

In some of the Jewish Pseudepigrapha, we find traces of another way of explaining psalm 2 which differs from the preceding ones in at least two respects. For one, it does not explicitly interpret psalm 2 from the perspective of the preceding psalm. What is, however, more remarkable is that the 'anointed one' is not identified with a community at all, but with an individual, namely a royal Messiah.

This interpretation can in particular be encountered in the Psalms of Solomon, a source which, contrary to many other Pseudepigrapha, appears to have remained free of Christian interpolations and reworkings and reflects the messianic expectations of Judaism in the first century C.E., in the period

¹⁶ This solution has been advanced by some scholars but has been questioned on the basis of powerful arguments by P. Maiberger, 'Das Verständnis von Psalm 2', p. 96-97.

following on the invasion of Palestine by Pompey in 63 BCE.¹⁷ In the seventeenth psalm of Solomon, God is asked to let arise the Son of David, God's king, so that he may "rule over Israel, God's παις (child/ servant) (vs. 21),) destroy the unrighteous rulers, [purge Jerusalem from gentiles and chase away the sinners from the patrimony]" (22).] While describing this Messiah's action against Israel's enemies, the author of the psalm makes use of images borrowed from Ps. 2, 9: God's king will "smash the arrogance of sinners like a potter's jar and shatter all their substance with an iron rod" (vs.24).¹⁸

There is no doubt that the object of this messianic retribution are first and foremost the gentiles. Still, it does not become entirely clear from the text, whether the Messiah will punish non-Jews only. The unrighteous rulers are possibly Jewish.¹⁹ Note further that the nations are transformed into 'sinners' without a clear indication whether they are to be found inside or outside the Jewish people.

Finally, an echo of a very similar eschatological and messianic interpretation of psalm 2, more specifically vs. 6, is to be found in 4 Ezra, generally dated to 100 CE. In this source the Messiah is described as "My son", standing on the top of mount Zion (ch.13,32), and reproving the assembled nations for their godliness (ibidem, vs. 37). Both the son-ship, the mount Zion and the reproof of the nations are themes that can be found in psalm 2.²⁰

II. Early Christianity

Psalm 2 is one of the most frequently quoted psalms in the New Testament. It is generally agreed that the words "you are my son", mentioned in the story of Jesus' baptism and echoed in the narrative of the transfiguration, allude to Ps. 2: 7, the reference being made even more explicit in the Western text of Luke 3: 22 which adds: 'today I have begotten you'.²¹ This means that Jesus is identified with the royal and anointed son of the psalm. Apart from vs. 7, other passages of the psalm are quoted or alluded to as well. In the Acts of the Apostles (4: 25-27), the conspiring and plotting of the nations and peoples together with their kings and leaders is associated with the conspiracy against Jesus which led to his execution. The nations are identified with the gentiles, the peoples with the Jewish people, the kings with Herod and the rulers with Pontius Pilate. The Book of the Revelation, finally, is the only New Testament text to offer an eschatological explanation of the psalm: various motifs derived from the psalm,

¹⁷ See for the Psalms of Solomon: H. Drijvers, 'Salomo III', in: TRE XXIX (1998), 730-732.

¹⁸ See also P. Maiberger, 'Das Verständnis von Psalm 2', 105-106.; R. Watts, 'The Psalms in Mark's Gospel', 27-28.

¹⁹ In Ps.Sol 17:15, the strangers acted lawless and idolatrous in Jerusalem and the children of the covenant joined them, whereas the devout fled to the desert.

²⁰ Cf. P. Maiberger, 'Das Verständnis von Psalm 2', 108.

²¹ Cf. Idem, 116.

for instance the iron rod and the pots of clay are used to describe the future victory of the Messiah and his sovereignty over the nations (2: 27 and 19:5).²²

The history of the interpretation of the psalm in early Christianity has been determined in a decisive way by the role it plays in the New Testament, with the sole exception of the passages in the Book of Revelation. More concretely, some interpretations encountered in early post-Biblical Judaism, are not found in early Christian interpretations. Thus, we do not find examples of early Christian explanations which associate the ‘anointed’ one with a community or with a group of people. Even more noteworthy is the fact that the eschatological interpretation found in the Psalm of Solomon, 4 Ezra, but also in the Book of Revelation – which identifies the anointed one with a future Messiah – is all but absent in early Christianity.

By contrast, the starting-point for the overwhelming majority if not all early Christian interpretations of the psalm, is a prophetic-Christological reading of this text. They are based on the conviction that Jesus who was proclaimed as the Messiah at his baptism and during the transfiguration and who was sentenced to death, suffered, died and resurrected, is the anointed one of verse 7 and the entire psalm is understood from that perspective. As a result, nascent Christianity regarded the whole of psalm 2 as a prophecy of the passion of Jesus, an interpretation which was of course further stimulated by Acts 4: 25-27, a passage frequently quoted in connection with psalm 2. This interpretation already underlies the first early Christian texts which are dealing with the psalm at some length. We encounter it in the writings of authors who in other respects differ from each other, such as Justin,²³ Tertullian,²⁴ Origen²⁵ and Hippolytus.²⁶ Suffice it here to quote the last-mentioned author who in his remarkable homily on the Psalms briefly and pithily states that the first of the two opening psalms carrying no title – “displays the birth of Christ, the second his passion and that it is therefore clear that ‘through these psalms is betokened the Word, the Wisdom, the only-begotten Son of the Father’”.²⁷ It hardly comes as a surprise that explanations dating of a somewhat later period, i.e. the third and fourth century, who advocate a prophetic-typological reading of the Old Testament, such as those of Eusebius of Caesarea, continue this tradition.²⁸ What is, however, more remarkable is that even the Antiochene exegetes who are well-known for their mistrust of allegorical and typological interpretations and exhibit an outspoken

²²Cf. S.Moyise, ‘The Psalms in the Book of Revelation’.

²³*Apology* I, 40.

²⁴*Adversus Marcionem* IV, 42;

²⁵See especially his *Selecta in Psalmos*, PG 12, 1099-1118.

²⁶See his *Homily on the Psalms*. Edition of the Greek text and French translation: P.Nautin, *Le dossier d’Hippolyte et de Méliton*, Paris 1953, 161-183. English translation: A. Stewart-Sykes, *Hippolytus. On the Apostolic Tradition*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York 2001. See for this homily also: H. Buchinger, ‘Die älteste erhaltene christliche Psalmenhomilie’, *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 104 (1995), 125-144; 272-298.

²⁷*Homily on the Psalms*, ch.19.

²⁸Eusebius of Caesarea, *Explanatio psalmi II*, PG 24, 79-92.

tendency to reduce typological explanations to an absolute minimum in favour of a ‘historical’ reading, explain the entire psalm from such a Christological-typological perspective.²⁹ It is noteworthy that Theodore of Mopsuestia even explicitly criticizes and denounces Jewish (!) attempts to identify the anointed one with David and to understand the psalm in that light, although he explicitly favours such an approach with numerous other psalms!

This interpretation, then, also constitutes the starting-point for the interpretation of the enemies of God and his anointed one (Christ). In the various ways in which early Christian writers try to identify the raging nations and their rulers, several tendencies may be distinguished. What all of them have in common is that, on the basis of Acts 4: 25-27, they blame both the Jews and the Gentiles, as well as their prototypes, Herod and Pilate, for the death of Jesus. Nonetheless, it may be observed that the various early Christian authors value the respective roles of the Jews and the Gentiles in different ways. Origen, for instance, carefully distinguishes four categories, namely the raging nations who were foreigners to the belief in Christ; the ‘peoples plotting in vain’, who were the Jews occupied with vain things while not understanding the prophecies of their Scripture; the kings and the rulers who, without further differentiation, are associated with Herod and Pontius Pilate; and the leaders of the Jews.³⁰ Moreover, in his interpretation of the remainder of the psalm, Origen shifts his attention from the four specific categories of enemies to the sinners in general. Thus, while discussing verse 3, he put these words not into the mouth of God’s enemies but attributes them to Christ who would have addressed the angels descending with Him to the earth (and who, for their part, would have been the subject of the first two verses!). Christ then exhorts the angels to follow his example by breaking asunder the bonds by which the sinners are bound and by casting away the yoke that weighs on them. This explanation is followed by an exhortation addressed to Origen’s readers to liberate themselves likewise from the bonds of sin.³¹ In the same vein, verses 8 and 9 are understood to refer to God’s punishment of the sinners, here compared with a shepherd who herds his sheep with an iron rod – in vs. 9, the LXX translates the Hebrew word תרעם by ποιμαίνεις (grazing, shepherding) – and with the (re)modelling of a vessel by a potter.³² By contrast, Theodore of Mopsuestia focuses much more on the nefarious role played by the Jews and his explanation accordingly betrays a polemical anti-Jewish tendency. Thus, he argues right at the beginning of his

²⁹ Cf. Diodore of Tarsus, *In Psalmos II* (ed. J. Olivier, CCSG 6, Turnhout 1980, 11-17; Theodore of Mopsuestia, *In psalmum II* (ed. R. Devreese, *Le commentaire de Théodore de Mopsueste sur les Psaumes (I-LXXX)*, Città del Vaticano 1939, 7-16. ²⁹ Note that both Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia interpret even the major part of Ps. 22 cited by Jesus at the cross in this way (cf. G. Dorival, ‘L’interprétation ancienne du Psaume 21 (TM 22)’, in: G. Dorival (ed.), *David, Jésus et la reine Esther. Recherches sur le Psaume 21(22TM)*, Paris-Louvain 2002, 225-314, es. 266-267 and G. Rouwhorst, ‘De interpretatie van psalm 22 door de kerkvaders’, in: M. Poorthuis, *Mijn God, mijn God, waarom hebt Gij mij verlaten?*, Baarn 1997, 94-115.

³⁰ PG 12, 1101.

³¹ PG 12, 1103-1105.

³² PG 12, 1107-1111.

explanation against the Jews who according to him err in applying the words of the psalm to David or Zerubbabel: “In the second psalm, David narrates everything that was fulfilled by the Jews at the time of the Passion of the Lord”.³³ Several details confirm the anti-Jewish tenor of Theodore’s explanation. Thus, the rulers taking counsel (against the Lord) are identified with the Scribes and the Pharisees and, while explaining vs. 4, Theodore states that the Lord laughs in order to show that the ‘attempts’ of the Jews have proven to be without effect.³⁴ For the Antiochenes, the theological debate with the Arians determines their explanation. The Arians interpret psalm 2 christologically as well, but argue from the adoption of the Messiah, that Christ’s eternal sonship is denied here. The Antiochenes point to the humanity of Christ to explain this feature, hereby saving Christ’s divinity.³⁵ Hence Theodore of Mopsuestia wages a battle on two fronts, against the Jews, by denying that David or Zerubbabel are the subjects, and against the Arians by emphasizing that David as the author of the psalm was talking about Christ’s humanity which was assumed by the divine Logos, was installed as the King of the universe (ps. 2, vs. 6) and received from Christ’s divinity the dominion over the universe (vs. 8).³⁶

A final example which may illustrate the varying attitudes with regard to the Jews that psalm 2 might provoke amongst early Christian writers, is verse 3: *"Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us."* We have seen above that Origen attributes these words to Christ descending together with his angels and liberating the sinners, whether Jew or Gentile, from their bonds and yokes. This explanation is also mentioned by Eusebius of Caesarea.³⁷ Tertullian, however, gives a different interpretation of the verse which is mentioned by Eusebius as well for that matter. In his extensive polemic against Marcion, Tertullian tries to convince the reader that Christianity worships the same Biblical God as revealed in the Old Testament and not a new God as Marcion claims. How then should Christianity value the commandments as revealed by the same Biblical God? Boldly, Tertullian attributes the breaking of the bonds neither to God’s enemies –whom he identifies with the Romans and Herod -, nor to Christ (as Origen does), but to the Christians in general. The Christians claim that they loosen the bonds and cast away the yoke of the Jewish Law (against the Jews), while nonetheless believing in the same God (against Marcion).³⁸ Challenged by Marcion to abandon the God of the Hebrew Bible in order to follow a different God, identified by Marcion with the Father of Jesus Christ, Tertullian sticks to his faith in the Biblical God, the Creator who revealed the Torah at Sinai. But why then do the Christians not observe these

³³ R. Devresse, *Le commentaire*, 7.

³⁴ Idem, p. 9-10.

³⁵ M.J. Rondeau, *Les commentaires patristiques du Psautier (IIIe-Ve siècles)*, volume II, Rome 1985, pp. 282-7.,

³⁶ Theodore, *In psalmum II*, 6.

³⁷ PG 24, 84.

³⁸ *Adversus Marcionem* V, 22. A similar motive appears in Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum* I,15; III, 119.

commandments?, Marcion would have rebutted. Tertullian underscores the temporary character of the dispensation of the commandments by referring to psalm 2,3: the bonds and cords are admittedly divine injunctions but are no longer valid after the coming of Christ. Christians themselves may state now: “let us loosen their bonds!” This ingenious exegesis did not remain without response from rabbinic side as we shall see later on.

The Antiochenes waver between two interpretations: whereas Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia attribute this psalm verse to the enemies of God and His anointed, whose rule they want to subvert, Theodoret of Cyrus sees here an invitation to the believers to cast off both the bonds of the pagans and the yoke of the transgressing Jews.³⁹

Clearly, the interpretation of the bonds as the Jewish commandments to be rejected by the Christians, surprising as it may seem, was not confined to Tertullian; we find it in Eusebius and in the Antiochene Theodoret, a sure indication of how widespread this interpretation was.

III. Rabbinic literature

Turning to Rabbinic interpretations of this same psalm, it may come as a surprise to us that the vivid image of the retribution by a personal Messiah, known from pre-Christian Jewish tradition and which has been further developed in early Christianity, recedes into the background, in spite of the psalm’s wording which clearly might invite such an interpretation. One of the most remarkable features of the Rabbinic exegesis of psalm 2 is a strong and widespread tendency to identify the anointed of verse 2 with the collective entity of the people of Israel.

The people of Israel as God’s anointed and its enemies

A characteristic example of this approach which is part and parcel of the Rabbinic explanation of psalm 2, is to be found in a passage of the Midrash Tehilim. The first line: ‘Why do the nations conspire?’ is interpreted as a complaint of the righteous against God, which is for the midrash a reason to ask whether they have the right to do so. When a man says to his friend: “Why do you do this or that?” the friend gets angry. But when the righteous complain against God about the nations, God does not get angry and the righteous are not punished. Why not? Because the righteous seek no boon for themselves, but only for the children of Israel (*Midrash Tehillim* 2:2).

The explanation perceives a distinction between the victim of the conspiracy (the people of Israel), and the speaker of the first line (the righteous). It implicitly acknowledges that not all Israel is righteous, but, in spite of this,

³⁹ See: Theodoret of Cyrus, *In Psalm* 2,3 (PG 80, 876C-877A). Cf. M.J. Rondeau, *ibidem*, p. 282.

Israel as a whole is identified with the anointed (and this is why God approves of the protest and complaint of the righteous who intercede on behalf of other members of the community).

Another interesting example is provided by the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael* (Shirata 7). This text locates the psalm at the moment of the song at the Red Sea after the people of Israel had been rescued from the Egyptians. The Pharaoh boasts that he will pursue them and will overtake them and divide the spoil (Ex 15:9), but “Thou, o Lord shall laugh” (ibidem). In the same vein “the nations conspire... let us break their bonds asunder.....but He that sits in heaven laughs” (Ps 2:1-4).

This midrash is rather succinct. Why would the nations wish to break their bonds? Whose bonds are meant? Pharaoh and the Egyptians are presented as tyrannical enemies who want to prevent Israel from fulfilling the commandments, “the bonds and cords”. Here the experience both of the Maccabean martyrs and of the Roman oppression may have contributed to that idea, projected onto the period of slavery in Egypt. Even an anti-Christian tendency cannot be excluded. Still, the anachronism of this midrash is clear as the people of Israel at the time of the Exodus had not yet received the Torah!

In an elaboration of the role of Pharaoh, the following midrash separates his doings from the conspiracy of the nations. Pharaoh tried to kill both Israel and its offspring. Similarly, Gog and Magog both fight “against the Lord and against his anointed”. The train of thought is quite twisted, but, in any case, a clear distinction is made between the doings of Pharaoh in the past and of Gog and Magog in the future (*Ester Rabba* 7:23). Only that last eschatological battle is dealt with in psalm 2, according to this midrash.⁴⁰

We notice how the collective notion of the people of Israel as anointed is combined with the location of the psalm in the future of the eschaton. Rabbinic tradition neither draws upon the pre-Christian Jewish notion of only a select group within Israel that is elected, nor upon the equally Jewish idea of wicked leaders within the Jewish people and of the battle against the Anointed as an imminent reality. Undoubtedly, the development of Christian exegesis of this psalm, claiming Christ as the anointed one, persecuted by Jewish leaders and their people (together with the Romans), was one of the principal factors which instigated this shift in Jewish interpretation.⁴¹ Curiously, it emerges that certain pre-Christian Jewish notions, such as criticism of wicked leaders have been preserved in Christianity better than in Judaism. The classical dichotomy between Jewish and Christian concepts should therefore be refined in a dialectical relationship: early Jewish notions have influenced early Christian ideas and were subsequently suppressed by rabbinic Judaism. This explains why

⁴⁰ With ‘eschatological’ we mean that the scene of the psalm is envisaged in the future, in the eschaton, not that this interpretation always entails a belief in a personal Messiah.

early Christianity often contains old Jewish themes and motives - be it utterly transformed – which have disappeared in Rabbinic Judaism.

Traces of a personal Messiah

The notion of a personal messiah is not wholly absent in Rabbinic interpretations of psalm 2, though. The most explicit connection between psalm 2 and the personal Messiah dates from the early Rabbinic period, as the following Talmudic dictum demonstrates.

In a famous digression on the Messiah and the Evil Inclination, the Rabbis teach: ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, will say to the Messiah the son of David – may he reveal himself speedily in our days - : “Ask of me anything and I will give it to you”, as it is said: “I will tell of the decree. This day I have begotten thee, ask of me and I will give the nations for thy inheritance (Ps 2:7-8). But when he will see that the Messiah the son of Joseph is slain, he will say to Him: Lord of the universe, I ask of thee only the gift of life. “As to life, He would answer him, “Your father David has already prophesied this about you”, as it is said: “He asked life of thee, Thou gavest it him, length of days for even and ever”(Ps 21:5)’ (*BT Sukkah 52a*).⁴²

The tension between the Messiah who will wage battles for Israel and God, and the Messiah as harbinger of peace, is here resolved by introducing two figures: the Messiah son of Joseph who will fight and will be slain, and the Messiah son of David, who will be the king of peace. This quotation from the Talmud can be dated before 200 C.E., as the introduction indicates a Tannaitic provenance. The Messiah son of Joseph, belonging to the tribe of Ephraim, is known from other Talmudic texts as well (see *BT Sanhedrin 98b*). In later midrash texts, his whereabouts are dealt with in more detail (see *Pirke de rabbi Eliezer 18*, again connected to psalm 2:2). We would not dare to be as outspoken as Israel Yuval who identifies the Rabbinic son of Joseph with Jesus son of Joseph. Still, we have to admit that there are striking similarities between both persons. The Rabbinic idea of the son of David as the real Messiah of peace, reigning after the death of the son of Joseph, would reflect Jewish polemic against the Christian persuasion of their Messiah, Jesus Christ risen from the death. In this respect it is noteworthy that especially in the late midrash *Pesiqta Rabbati* (7th century or later), the description of the Messiah named Ephraim (son of Joseph), is highly similar to the Passion narrative, including the use of psalm 22.⁴³ However, the

⁴¹ Compare how the metaphor of the winepress becomes a bone of contention between Jews and Christians, Jews condemning by it Christians, no doubt in reaction to Christian appropriation of the metaphor of the winepress to condemn Judaism. See J. Schwartz, ‘A holy people in the winepress: treading the grapes and holiness’, M. Poorthuis & J., Schwartz (eds), *A Holy People. Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Religious Communal Existence*, Leiden 2006, pp. 39-51, esp. 45.

⁴² Cp. *BT Sanhedrin 92b* and J. Heinemann, ‘The Messiah son of Ephraim and the Premature Exodus of the Tribe of Ephraim’, in: L. Landman (ed.), *Messianism in the Talmudic Era*, New York 1979, 339-353.

⁴³ See: I.J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb. Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Berkeley, 2006, pp. 33-37

idea of two Messiahs seems to play no role here, which fact weakens Yuval's theory.

The gentile proselyte

Our next example of rabbinic interpretation again does not know of a personal Messiah. It deals with the curious figure of the gentile proselyte, which will permit us to trace a direct influence from the Church Fathers to this rabbinical motif. Its context is the well-known apologetic description of the (non-Jewish) nations who, upon seeing the benefits of the messianic times, will argue that they will observe the Torah as well if offered to them anew (*BT Abodah Zarah* 3a-b; a different version in *Tanhuma Buber* Deut 5 (Shoftim) 9).

God will decide to give the nations a chance to build a booth, which is an easy commandment for God does not rule as a tyrant over his creatures (טַרְנוּנִיא < θυραυνία). However, then it will become clear how the nations will trample down the booths and go away. This is illustrated by the verse: "Let us break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us" (ps 2:3).

It is an ingenious interpretation, widely differing from the Rabbinic one offered above. "Their bonds and cords" are Israel's indeed, but here the nations have appropriated 'their bonds' for themselves! The bonds and cords turn out to be the religious commandments God gave to Israel, although here the heathens as 'would-be proselytes' are the spokesmen. In reaction to their behaviour, God will laugh, under reference to psalm 2:4: "He that sitteth in heaven laugheth".

In another description of the Messianic times, proselytes-under-pressure, i.e. not out of conviction, are described as idol worshippers who nevertheless put on phylacteries and wear fringes. However, when the eschatological battle of Gog-Magog will come about they will be asked: "why have you come?" And they will answer: "Against God and His Anointed", as it is said: "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?" (*BT Abodah Zarah* 3b).

Apparently, according to this interpretation, the "plotting in vain" refers to the calculating motives of the heathens to become proselytes only after they have seen the benefits of it. However, their proselytism will not endure under pressure. This Rabbinic interpretation sees psalm 2 as a description of the Messianic times, by understanding 'His anointed' as referring to a future Messiah, although his exact task may remain obscure. This eschatological moment will be a *demasqué*, not so much of pagans in general, but especially of those who wish to join Israel only at that moment by putting on the phylacteries, that were initially rejected. This will be of no avail, because in the end these opportunistic proselytes will throw away their yoke of the commandments and will turn themselves against God and his Messiah.

In search of the context of this midrash, we might wonder what kind of proselytes are meant here. These curious people first reject bonds and yoke, i.e. they first refuse to acknowledge the significance of the commandments. In the

future they will try to take upon themselves at least some of the commandments but they will not succeed. Then they will throw off the bonds once more. Obviously this cannot refer to gentiles as such who do not have a stake in the commandments at all. Undoubtedly, Christians are intended here who argue that the validity of bonds and yoke has been abolished, a widespread *theologoumenon* from the second century onward. But we can even be more precise in locating this Christian conviction. Tertullian (and after him Cyprian, Eusebius of Caesarea and Theodoret) read exactly this same psalm verse 2: 2-3 as the Christian rejection of the ceremonial laws, as we have seen earlier! There is no doubt then that this rather twisted argument in the midrash is directed not to gentiles as such, but to Christianity. This midrash appears to be fully aware of the Christian exploitation of this psalm verse.⁴⁴ The rebuttal from Jewish side becomes now even more poignant, for those proselytes who abolished the ceremonial laws can indeed be identified with those Christians who argued from the same psalm 2:3 that the ceremonial law was abolished. Such an intimate knowledge at the Jewish side of this early Patristic testimony in Tertullian, is not at all improbable, since there are several proofs of a direct contact between this Christian author and Jewish spokesmen in the city of Carthago.⁴⁵

The midrashic argument remains more or less incomprehensible without assuming this historical influence by Christian interpretations of this same psalm verse. Apparently, these verses from psalm 2 constituted a bone of contention between Jews and Christians in presumably oral interactions.

Israel as God's anointed

In the *Aggadat Bereshit 2*, the context is likewise the Messianic times of Gog-Magog.⁴⁶ Whereas the wicked ones in the past stood up against the people of Israel and left God in peace, Gog wants to go against God and His anointed simultaneously, hence: “the rulers plot against God and His anointed” (Ps 2:2). It should be observed that here ‘the anointed’ cannot be an individual but must refer to a collective entity. We may detect here a similarity with the Qumranic text quoted earlier. Still here the collective entity concerns all of the people of Israel, not just an elect group, as might have been the case in Qumran. Hence, there is no polemic against a supposedly unworthy priesthood in Jerusalem, as we saw in earlier texts, both from Qumran and the pseudepigraphic Psalms of Solomon. This midrash then sees a parallel between the persecution of the Jewish people (‘the Anointed’) and the denial of the God of Israel. Although the

⁴⁴ While dating Tertullian's *Adversus Marcionem* to around 210 CE, the midrash might be dated at the end of the third century. See for Tertullian's interaction with Judaism, mainly orally: C. Aziza, *Tertullien et le Judaïsme*, Nice 1977. Carthago knew a large Jewish community.

⁴⁵ Cp. Tertullian on the gold and silver from Egypt (*Adversus Marcionem* 2: 20), with Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 91a and parr. and see C. Aziza, *Tertullien et le Judaïsme*, Nice 1977, 91-91. On Jewish presence in Carthago, see E. Schürer, G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Goodman, *The History of the Jewish People*, III.1, Edinburgh 1986, 63.

⁴⁶ See for this midrash, dated to the tenth century C.E., L. Teugels, *Aggadat Bereshit. Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Notes*, Leiden 2001 (JCP 4).

midrash Aggadat Bereshit contains some anti-Christian elements, it is difficult to assess this in this particular instance.⁴⁷ Still, the persistent identification of the Messiah with the collectivity of the people of Israel is noteworthy.⁴⁸ Equally noteworthy is the persistent location of the psalm in the eschaton. Although Theodore of Mopsuestia knew of Jewish interpretations that identify God's anointed with a past hero such as king David, we do not find a trace of that line of interpretation in the midrash. Still, both lines can be explained out of the same urge to refute a Christological interpretation of the psalm.⁴⁹ Biblical past and remote messianic future both serve to repudiate Christianity's claim of fulfilment in the not so distant past.

The following midrash, already quoted in part before, heightens the apocalyptic atmosphere still more. Again 'the anointed' is a collective entity of the whole people of Israel, as we saw before, without any reference to 'wicked leaders'. The wicked are firmly located outside the people, at least according to rabbinic perception. Cain, Esau, and Pharaoh were fools, according to this midrash, because they did not reckon with Israel's offspring when they persecuted the people of Israel. Slightly shifting the argument, the midrash proceeds with Gog and Magog, both eschatological enemies of Israel, who want to be cleverer than these Biblical arch-enemies. They realize that Israel has a Protector (Patron < Greek *πάτρων*) in heaven, and state:

"I will not act thus but I will first join issue with their Protector and then I will join issue with them. Hence it is written: "The kings of the earth stand up and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and His anointed" (Ps 2:2). In an apocalyptic vein, God answers: "Wretch, do you come to join issue with Me? How many hosts are at My service, how many lightnings, how many thunders, as it is said: The Lord thundered with great thunder (1 Sam 7:10); how many Seraphim and how many angels! But My might shall go out and wage war with you, as it is said: "Then shall the Lord go out and fight the nations" (Zech. 14:3) (*Ester Rabba* 7:23; cf. *Leviticus Rabba* 27:11).

The psalm is here transformed into an apocalyptic imagery of the End of Times, with no doubt as to the final victory of all of the people of Israel. Not the Messiah but God himself appears here as a warrior who wages battles for His people. Just like in the case of Abraham, four kings engaged (*אַרְבָּעָה מְלָכִים* < *ζευγόν*) him in battle, the nations engage Israel in battle. But the Holy One will fight for Israel, just as He did for Abraham (*Tanhuma Buber Gen* 3:12). Traces of a self-critical concept of eschatological judgment, known from the Hebrew Bible, or of

⁴⁷ See for anti-Christian elements in the Aggadat Bereshit: L. Teugels, 'The Background of the anti-Christian Polemics in Aggadat Bereshit', *JSJ* 30 (1999), 178-208.

⁴⁸ Compare the later Jewish interpretation of the Suffering Servant as a collective identity, in reaction to the Christian application of it to Christ.

⁴⁹ In the midrash on psalm 72, these two lines go along together. See M. Poorthuis, 'King Solomon and the psalms 72 and 24 in the debate between Jews and Christians', *Transitions; Liturgical Parallels in Christianity and Judaism in the First millennium*, Albert Gerhards & Clemens Leonard (eds), Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series (forthcoming).

Jewish criticism of Jewish leaders as we encountered them in pseudepigraphic and Qumran literature are wholly absent in this midrash: the anointed is the whole of the Jewish people.⁵⁰ Again we may assume that Christian criticism of Jewish leadership and of the presumed ‘stubbornness’ of the Jewish people, causing their rejection as chosen people, has favoured this inner-Jewish transformation from a judgment of people and its leaders towards a concept of salvation for the *whole people of Israel*.

God and His anointed

In another digression, the midrash deals with the relationship proper between the Holy One and His anointed. The heathen is likened to someone who hates the king but cannot master him. What did he do? He went to the king’s statue and was about to cast it down, when fear of the king seized him lest he should be slain. He then decides to undermine the wall beneath. (*Exodus Rabba* 51:5). This does not only explain the line: “against the Lord and His anointed”, but also throws new light upon the subsequent verse: “Let us break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us”(Ps 2:3). This midrash, in the name of rabbi Hiyya bar Abba (end of the 3d century C.E.), compares the anointed – again Israel- to the statue of the king. This serves to illustrate the strategy of the enemy not to attack Israel directly, but to weaken its religious existence (‘to undermine the wall’) by forbidding a life according to the Torah.⁵¹ Here the ‘bands and cords’ are Israel’s own religious obligations!

Again, it is striking that ‘the anointed’ does not refer to an individual Messianic figure, although that interpretation would be ready at hand. The suppression of an individual Messianic figure in favour of the collective entity of the people of Israel as anointed can only be explained as a conscious, be it a veiled, polemic against Christocentric interpretations of this same psalm.

A striking example of the same tendency is provided by the following midrash, which argues, - against all evidence -, that the Anointed of psalm 2: 7 is *not* God’s son!

“God does not say: “I have a son’, but: “Thou art like a son to me”, as when a master wishing to give pleasure to his slave, says to him: “Thou art as dear to me as a son”.⁵² The expression, although meant as praise, does not indicate a

⁵⁰ Compare how rabbi Simlai transforms the the prophecy of doom of Amos 5:18 into a judgment for the gentiles (read: the Christians) and into salvation for Israel (BT Sanhedrin98b). The Christian counterpart to such transformation of Biblical prophecy from selfcriticism to condemnation of the opponent can be found in the Epistle of Barnabas 2-3.

⁵¹ See for a similar concept the parable about the fox who invites the fish to live together with him on land. The fish answers that he is already in danger in the water, how much more so on land. Rabbi Akiba tells this parable to explain his continuation of the study of Torah, despite the Roman sanction of the death penalty (BT Berachot 61b).

⁵² A little earlier, this midrash states that the children of Israel are called ‘son’ in Ps 2:7, again in conformity with the tendency in later Rabbinic texts to diminish the significance of a personal Messiah. Even the ‘son of man’ in Daniel 7:13 is demythologized in its application to Israel! See Midr. Teh 2:8.

real status as son!⁵³ The Christian application of this verse as referring to Jesus' sonship is widely attested from the New Testament onwards and apparently has not escaped Jewish eyes or rather ears.

A parable of the final judgment

An apocalyptic setting combined with an outright polemic against Christianity can be detected in the following parable of the straw, the chaff and the stubble. In contrast with the previous midrash, here Israel's privileged position is emphasized, whereas the obvious notion of 'son' has been interpreted away.

The straw, the staff and the stubble were arguing that it was for their sake that the ground had been sown. The wheat said: 'Wait until the threshing times comes'. When it turned out that the farmer scattered the chaff to the winds, he threw the straw upon the floor and the stubble he cast into the fire. The wheat he piled up in a heap and all passers-by when they saw it kissed it, as it says: "Kiss ye the corn" (Ps 2:12).⁵⁴

In the application, the polemical context is clear:

Some of the nations say: "We are Israel and for our sake the world was created", and others say: "We are Israel and for our sake the world was created". Says Israel to them: "Wait until the day of the Holy One blessed be He, comes, and we shall see for whose sake the world was created" (*Song of Songs Rabba* 7:3,3).

This rather far-fetched interpretation of ps 2:12 points to complications in the Biblical text. The verse is in some translations understood as: "yearn for purity" ('bar'), whereas the RSV reads 'bar' as the beginning of 'be-regalav', "his feet". Still, the meaning of this interpretation can be understood from the psalm's general apocalyptic setting. The verse: "kiss the corn", is interpreted as Israel's ultimate vindication over against the nations. Israel is the corn, the gentiles (i.e. the Christians) are only chaff and stubble, although they pretend to be the corn. The 'nations' can hardly be interpreted as gentiles in general, but are here clearly identified with the Christian church, given the latter's claim to be the true Israel! The idea that the world was created on behalf of the Christians can be found in several early Christian texts and is itself a transformation of a Jewish idea.⁵⁵

Although the ultimate condemnation of the heathens is unambiguous, Rabbinic tradition sometimes hesitates for the consequences. The condemnation seems to negate freedom of action and the possibility of repentance, concepts

⁵³ The other device, to shift the sonship to the collective identity of the people of Israel, under reference to Ex 4:22, is common in Rabbinic literature.

⁵⁴ The pun-like use of the word 'bar' is highly intricate, as it can refer to 'corn', to 'son' and to 'pure', which is itself interpreted as the pure teaching of the Torah (LXX: paideia; Vulgate: disciplina). See: P. Maiberger, 'Das Verständnis von Psalm 2 in der Septuaginta, im Targum, in Qumran, im frühen Judentum und im Neuen Testament', 111 ff.

⁵⁵ See Epistle to Diognete 6:7; Aristides, Apology 16, both from the 2d century C.E.

central to the Rabbinic tradition. This explains an equally far-fetched explanation encountered in Midrash Tehillim that the ‘smashing of the pottery’ concerns clay not yet baked, so that a better pottery: read: a change of fate for the better, remains possible.⁵⁶

This same idea might provide the background for the use of the LXX reading of ps 2:9:

“he will herd (ποιμαίνω) the nations with an iron rod”.

Rev. 2:26-27 uses the same verb and manages herewith to avoid the idea of a total destruction of the gentiles.⁵⁷ Surprisingly, the Anointed here appears not as an individual but: “Everyone who conquers and continues to do My works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; to herd them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered”(Rev 2: 26-27). Like in the Qumran Florilegium and in several Rabbinic texts, ‘the anointed’ is interpreted in this text from Revelation as the community of *true* believers.⁵⁸ Elsewhere the victory belongs to “the Lord and His anointed (Rev 11:15), whose arch-enemies are the ‘kings of the earth’ (Rev 19:19), likewise inspired upon psalm 2. It is surprising how similar Revelation is to later Jewish interpretations as condensed in the midrash, especially in its eschatological outlook, wholly lacking in all other Christian texts. Even as an ultimately Christian document, Revelation has preserved the eschatological perspective.

Conclusion

The earliest Jewish interpretations of psalm 2 display a tension within the Jewish people: wicked (Jewish) leaders together with lawless pagans are the enemies of the anointed, whether the chosen ones or the chosen individual. This breach within the Jewish people is heightened even more in the New Testament application of this psalm to the suffering of Christ. The imminent eschatological outlook, already present in Qumran and Pseudepigrapha, is transformed into a description of present reality, embodied in the suffering and subsequent vindication of God’s anointed, Christ.

Both the application of psalm 2 to a personal Messiah and the reading of the psalm as a scenario of present realities disappear completely in subsequent Rabbinic interpretations. The individual concept of the anointed as the Messiah in older layers of Rabbinic interpretation, and even clearer in pre-Rabbinic pseudepigraphic Jewish literature, is taken over by the collective notion of the

⁵⁶ R. Isaac said: It is not said: “an earthen vessel”, but “a potter’s vessel”, which can be reshaped before being put through the fire” (Gen Rabba 14:7; Midrash Tehillim 2:11). The context, dealing with the notion of resurrection connected to pottery that can be reshaped, (Midr Tehillim 2:11) is secondary.

⁵⁷ See Steve Moyise, ‘The Psalms in the Book of Revelation’, S. Moyise & M. Menken (eds), *The Psalms in the New Testament*, London 2004, 231-234, who points to the similarity between שׂוֹמֵר = to shepherd, and שָׂרַר = to shatter, without however drawing the analogy with the midrash quoted above.

⁵⁸ Apoc. 12:5 (the child) and 19:15 (the white horseman) likewise rule with an iron rod, probably indicating Christ. In addition, there might be a connection between the three woes (Rev 8:13; 9:12) and Midr Teh 2:9, where Rav Huna states that suffering is divided in three portions: one for the Patriarchs, one for the Roman persecution and one for the Messiah.

people of Israel in later Jewish literature. There, the people of Israel as such is the anointed, forming a unified chosen entity without any reference to unworthy leaders or a misbehaving people, whereas the pagans are probably more often the Christians than the gentiles, even if this is not said explicitly and only allusion is made to it. All this may indicate the shift from first century Judaism with its rival parties and its resistance against the Roman occupation, to the Byzantine period with Christianity as the wielder of power.

Moreover, psalm 2 is interpreted in post-Biblical Jewish tradition as a future apocalyptic/Messianic event, rather than as an episode from the past. Not once we found a reference to David as the subject of the psalm. This is all the more surprising, for in other instances Rabbinic tradition does not hesitate to connect psalms to Biblical figures (e.g. psalm 22 to Esther; psalm 110 to David or Abraham; psalm 24 and 72 to Solomon).⁵⁹ The reason might be that the ‘raging of the nations’ could not so easily be associated with Rabbinic perspectives on David’s reign, which was supposed to be one of peace and prosperity. We have to wait until the Middle Ages, before Jewish exegetes like Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Kimhi point to David’s anointing and his battle with the Philistines as the proper context for this psalm.⁶⁰

Our research has demonstrated that the more traditional picture of Christianity as wholly dependent upon Judaism no longer stand up to critical historical research. Instead of a father–son or mother-daughter relationship, the image of two quarrelling sisters, or twin brothers, or the elder brother teaching the younger, might be coined. The theological implications of such metaphors still need to be thought over thoroughly, both on the Christian side and on the Jewish side. Our psalm offers a wonderful opportunity for that, both in its clashes of interpretations and in its perspectives of a Messianic future. Seen from this perspective, The later Jewish emphasis upon the collective identity of Israel as the anointed can be seen as a rebuttal of the Christian claim to be the true Israel combined with the accusation that the Jews and their leaders, together with Romans and Pilate, had been responsible for the death of Jesus. This accusation had already been made in Acts but it was carried further by the Church Fathers and remained in full force whereas, incidentally, from Eusebius of Caesarea onwards, the accusations against the Romans tended to become less sharp.⁶¹

⁵⁹ See M. Poorthuis, ‘King Solomon and the psalms 72 and 24 in the debate between Jews and Christians’, C. Leonhardt (ed.), *Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series* (forthcoming).

⁶⁰ See M. Signer, ‘Kings/Messiah: Rashi’s exegesis of Psalm 2’, *Prooftexts* 3,3 (1983), 273-78.

⁶¹ See in particular Eusebius, *In Ps.* II, 9 (PG 24, 89). The conversion of Constantine and the Roman Empire prompted Eusebius to undertake a wholesale revision of the role of the Romans who instead of being the persecutors of the Christians, are now subduing the enemies of the Church with an iron rod.

The Christian interpretation of this psalm pointed to different layers. Tertullian and Cyprian consciously took issue with Jewish ceremonial practices and defended the abolishment of the ceremonial laws as the “breaking of the bonds and the yoke”. In response, the midrash could be read as a conscious rebuttal of that claim. Likewise the Christian claim to recognize Jesus as Son of God met with polemics in the midrash, clearly recognizable as such because of its farfetched character.

Other Christian interpretations developed a less historical-polemical attitude, but aimed at the application of the psalm to the human soul, freed from bondage of sin and death, just as Christ was freed from bondage of death by descending into the Sheol. Here salvation presents itself simultaneously as individual and as encompassing all of human nature, by transforming it into divine life. The historical dimensions tend to recede into the background however.

From a theological point of view, the interpretations of this psalm pose provoking questions concerning the Jewish and Christian identities. The Christian conviction that history has met its fulfilment in Christ, faces the challenge of how to deal with a world that still “lies in chains”. This should not be seen as a rebuttal of the Christian faith as such, although in Jewish-Christian dialogue this is sometimes brought forward, (hereby denying human freedom to answer the Messianic call of Christ). It should rather be seen as an appeal to Christians to live up to their redeemed existence.

The Jewish expectation of the Messianic future on the other hand and the indispensable role of the Jewish people therein, should not be seen as a mere error – although Christianity often interpreted it as such – but rather as a reminder that real salvation does not occur outside history and is not a mere individual matter. The different attitudes taken by Christians and Jews towards salvation history: the former imitating Christ, the latter observing God’s commandments, have been seen as mutually incompatible in all of the interpretations of psalm 2 surveyed above, be they Jewish or Christian. As such, the history of the interpretation of the psalm documents a sad history of mutual denial, which infringes upon the Messianic perspective of the psalm both for Jews and for Christians.

A second theological challenge to both Christianity and Judaism concerns the highly apocalyptic outlook of psalm 2. The world seems to be divided in God and His anointed on the one hand, surrounded by enemies and pagans on the other hand. This dichotomy between good and evil may lead to a dangerous vindication of oneself and to demonizing the ‘others’. Fortunately, many other psalms contain a strong self-criticism, which ‘counterbalances’, as it were, this apocalyptic psalm. The apocalyptic outlook of psalm 2 may be understandable from the position of a persecuted minority, but if it is maintained when this minority attains a position of power, the risk of abusing God’s authority for one’s own

benefit is just around the corner. Especially in concrete political situations, this danger looms large. Thus, it may happen that the psalm is made the guiding principle on the Israeli side for their attitude towards the Palestinians and towards the world at large.⁶²

As for the Christians, they definitely quite often did not resist the temptation of dividing the world in the realm of light and the realm of darkness, comfortably locating themselves in the former and the Jews in the latter. Christians should realize that the commemoration of the death and resurrection of Christ should not incite to a search for old and new “enemies” of Christ, but should invite to a truly redeemed Christian life for the benefit of all mankind.

The theological challenge for both Christianity and Judaism will undoubtedly be the acceptance of religious difference as a mutual exhortation to a “good competition” on the road to God’s future.

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Marcel Poorthuis

⁶² Especially Christian fundamentalists are prone to apply this psalm 2 to the political situation of Israel in the Middle East.