



Catholic; and here they are, reading the time-honored Protestant version of the Bible in a class made up of Catholics and Jews as well as Protestants.

And that was the beginning of my enchantment with the Psalms and of the never-ending allure of the English language for me.

I was in for a big surprise when as a preteen I took up going to synagogue regularly every Shabbat on Saturday morning. I have to admit not being able to contain my pride discovering the Psalms we heard at public school were originally composed by the Jews. The worship service in our synagogue was conducted predominantly in the Hebrew language, including the Psalms. On those occasions we read any of the Psalms in English, they all had the ring of soothing familiarity. The wording was all but the same as what had been read every morning at the start of classes at school.

Nor was this by chance or accident.

The American Jewish community has its own modern English translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew, the *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*. It was published by the Jewish Publication Society in 1985. An older rendition that came out in 1917 relied on the best of Jewish biblical scholarship available at the time, which embraced the ancient, medieval and contemporary. Its eloquent introduction tells us in some detail the methodology used and explains that the standard Christian translations were not acceptable for Jewish use because of their christological slant. Hence the need for English-speaking Jews to have their own translation. Nonetheless, among others, the late nineteenth-century British revised edition of the King James Version (1611) served as a model in language and style for the JPS's *Holy Scriptures*. That would undoubtedly make clear why my exposure to the Psalms in the synagogue had a definite KJV flavor.

At Christian funerals it is almost without fail, I have noticed as a non-adherent, the Twenty-Third Psalm being read, no doubt because of the frequent association of its two verses with life everlasting, or life after death, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me" and "I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

This is particularly interesting to me, because according to the way the Psalm has been handled in traditional Jewish exegesis, "the house of the LORD" refers to none other than the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, and the assertion "and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever" is in effect an entreaty never again to be driven away from the sacred precincts of the Temple, as happened catastrophically more than once. Similarly in the case of "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" we encounter another significant difference in interpretation. According to the standard Jewish exposition over the centuries, the Hebrew word commonly translated "the shadow of death," *tsalmavet*, means "deep, impenetrable darkness," and, figuratively, the darkness of despair, melancholy or sorrow (not all of them, by the way, necessarily related to death). A tenth-century Jewish grammarian and poet born in Morocco, Dunash ben Labrat, pointed out a cognate Arabic term as having precisely the same meaning, deep darkness. So, unlike the older Christian commentaries, the majority of the Jewish ones from the earliest days I have examined link the Twenty-Third Psalm with either death or the afterlife.

That being the case, other Psalms that have their power to move and that in some fashion touch on human mortality and the perpetuity of the human spirit have been more or less the norm during Jewish observances memorializing the departed, like Psalm 16 ("I have set the LORD always before

me,” shivviti, in Hebrew), Psalm 49 (which embraces the decisive line [v. 15], “But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me. Selah”), Psalm 90 (“LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations”), Psalm 91 (“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide in the shadow of the Almighty”), and Psalm 121 (“I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help”).

All the same, it has been rather prevalent at most non-Orthodox Jewish funerals and memorial services, notably in this country and throughout the British Commonwealth, to hear the beloved Twenty-Third Psalm recited. What we have here, then, is a clear instance of the majority culture bearing upon Jewish worship practices, all of it, I’m willing to wager, unwittingly and unawares. Let me put it in another way, it is awfully comforting while attending the funeral of a dear Christian friend, now departed, to hear words familiar to you from your own tradition, albeit used very differently from the way you’re accustomed to. And wouldn’t you know, before you realize it, you’re using the very same words their (the Christian) way - that is, on behalf of cherished ones that are no more.

Allow me take a minute or two at this point and offer you a very, very quick summary of the way Jews traditionally utilize the Psalms. During the Morning Service every single day, whether it’s a weekday or a Sabbath or a Festival, a number of Psalms are chanted as a kind of devotional exercise in preparation for the main portion of the service which includes the Shema’ and its attendant benedictions. Similarly, late Friday afternoon a series of Psalms (95-99 and 29) are intoned in anticipation of the Sabbath’s arrival at sundown. On Jewish holy days of a joyous character, like Passover or Hanukkah, there is the jubilant singing of the Hallel, as during the far-off days of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Hallel is comprised of Psalms 113-118. Expressive of roughly the whole range of human emotion, Psalms are commonly said by those who are ill or in a crisis of some sort as well as amid happy circumstances. Then, as my learned friend and study partner Rabbi Shmuel Klatzkin reminds me, there are those especially devout Jews, particularly in the Hasidic community, who go above and beyond and make a point of regularly reciting all 150 Psalms within a week’s time or over a period of a month and on specified occasions besides, as throughout the night of Yom Kippur.

Now, for the sake of comparison, let’s consider briefly some of the ways the Psalms have been treated in the Christian liturgy. During a celebration of the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran Churches, certainly the central liturgical event in Christian worship, a Psalm is almost invariably tucked in between the first two appointed readings from Scripture and read or chanted, often with a uniform choral/congregational response, called an antiphon. The Psalms play a far larger role during the Divine Office, or what is called the Liturgy of the Hours in the Catholic Church, or the Morning Prayer and the Evening Prayer in the Anglican and Lutheran Churches.

And now to compare. We are aware that until two thousand years ago the Jewish people brought to the Temple twice daily the perpetual offering, the Tamid, one in the morning and one at dusk. I was glad to be reminded by my cherished friend and kinsman of the spirit, the gifted Dr. Ritter Werner, that it was that ancient Jewish pattern the Anglican Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was following in creating the Book of Common Prayer for the Church of England during the heyday of Henry VIII. He was the one who abridged the medieval Catholic Liturgy of the Hours. In those days and for a long while thereafter the Liturgy of the Hours numbered anywhere between five to eight times a day. What the good archbishop did was to reduce them to two, the Morning Prayer and the Evening

Prayer. In so doing Cranmer harked back to the two times every day the Jews in antiquity offered up their Tamid in the Sanctuary as prescribed by the Torah.

It is interesting that the Catholics have since followed suit in trimming the Liturgical Hours to the more manageable two, and now routinely recite Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer on a daily basis. It might be noted that the Episcopalians have divided up the Psalms in their Book of Common Prayer so that they may be repeated in their entirety over the course of a month. Again, like the devout in Judaism.

I have a story to tell you. Early in my teaching career, at the request of several people, I gave a course at the University of Dayton in Classical Hebrew, which is essentially the Hebrew of the Bible. A number of those enrolled were priests, brothers and nuns, most of them from the Marianist order of the Catholic Church, as well as one or two Protestant clergy. The remainder were juniors and seniors. At a whim I took a short survey and asked the entire class why they signed up for the course. The answers naturally varied, ranging from that of a young man, of Irish-Slovene background, who admitted he was hopelessly in love with a sophomore at another school who was Jewish - and thought knowing the sacred language of her people was one sure way to win her heart - all the way to the touching answer of an elderly priest, for whom everybody in the class developed a special fondness. The unfailingly upbeat cleric - Father Edwin Weber was his name - said, rather movingly, "Every day for a major part of my life I have prayed the Psalms and connected with Jesus Christ - and his people, the Jews. Now through the Hebrew language I will feel even more connected as I repeat them in the original tongue in which Our Lord said them."

Another story, once again from my own personal experience.

An exceptional friend and very much the religious pilgrim, Brian Millar, was accustomed to going every year to the famed Gethsemane Monastery on retreat. Once he invited me to come along as an observer, as I had heard about it and knew this is where Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and prolific author, spent most of his contemplative life. We stayed at the visitors' quarters and attended chapel, where the old Liturgical Hours were still fully maintained. We arose before dawn, and the monks were already chanting Vigils. It was all so magnificent and inspiring. I found myself mesmerized by their reverent rendition of the Psalms so dear to me, and was even able to share in their quiet devotion. Then of a sudden the euphoric mood and feeling of rapport were dispelled when they concluded with the singing of the Gloria Patri. The Gloria Patri, an acclamation of the Trinity, is the Latin for "Glory be to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be world without end. Amen." Here, sadly, we had to part company. The doctrine of the Trinity, so pivotal to the Christian faith, is so contrary to what the Jewish religion teaches about the nature of God. I subsequently learned this sentence attached to the end of every Psalm said or sung is a near-universal practice in all branches of Christendom, all the way from the exotic age-old Coptic and Chaldean churches in Africa and Asia to the Presbyterian and United Methodist churches near where I live. The Gloria Patri was originally formulated a good while ago at a time of considerable controversy over the definition of the Trinity. All I can say is that this formula does in fact Christianize the ancient Jewish prayers we all know as the Psalms. One can recognize and genuinely respect Christianity's right to alter or modify according to the dictates of its theological understanding. But the upshot is: there is something ironic, indeed tragic, if Jews and Christians cannot say together the Psalms they both love because of the one statement of doctrine tagged on. The dilemma is certainly a profound one, and hardly one to be underestimated. Nor am I certain of any easy answer. So what to do?

The following will show all is not lost.

There was a time among churches which dissented from the Church of England, the so-called Nonconformist churches whose worship consisted chiefly of singing the Psalms set to meter, which can quickly enough become monotonous. Before too long a trend developed of transforming the Psalms so that they might be sung as melodious hymns. Foremost among the practitioners of this art was the fertile Nonconformist hymn-writer Isaac Watts (1674-1748). In your handout, on pages 3 and 4, you can get an idea how Watts wrought his appealing poetic transformation of Psalm 90.

The high school I attended was in a suburb of Boston that had an ethnically, racially and religiously diverse population, the Jewish segment of which was by no means negligible proportionally. Graduation exercises at the end of the school year usually featured a hymn or two. Given the ways things were then, the hymns were typically of Protestant origin. Out of regard for the sensibilities of the Jewish pupils and their families, the administration and the faculty invited a varied group of us seniors to discuss what we could in good conscience sing at our graduation and that would not do violence to the cherished beliefs of those present. The choices were narrowed down to “Come Thou, Almighty King” (which, if you read the second and third stanzas you’ll discover to be unabashedly Trinitarian), “All People That on Earth Do Dwell” (a very old sing-able paraphrase of Psalm 100), and “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” (by our aforementioned Isaac Watts). It took no time for the students to vote, almost unanimously, for “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” We all sang it with fervor on our big day. It was after all, Psalm 90 in the form of a lyric.

I must not fail to mention at this point a valued friend of mine and Catholic priest, Father Bertrand Buby, and his engaging book of reflections on the Psalms entitled *With A Listening Heart*. By virtue of his proficiency in the Hebrew original of the Psalms and with the help of topflight critical biblical scholarship that crosses denominational boundaries, Buby is able to let the Psalms speak for themselves. Such a book with a sensitive and fair-minded approach can without question be used with profit by Jew and Christian alike.

Just a year ago Father Buby, the refreshingly forthright Rev. William Young who is a minister in the United Church of Christ, and I were invited by the long-lasting Dayton Christian-Jewish Dialogue to discuss the so-called Messianic Psalms, namely, Psalms 2 and 110. What a revealing if uneasy exchange that was! Traditionally Christianity has taken these Psalms as predicting the Messiah; the Jewish reading has been that they are royal Psalms alluding to the then-current occupant of the throne of David, and no more than that. Once again our differences were paramount and unmistakable. Nonetheless, what was quite evident and remarkable at this very meeting at Alumni Hall of the University of Dayton was the level of trust, candor, genuine affection and esteem, and sharing, which remains. As Bill Young and I left Father Bert for the parking lot after our session, we recited together, spontaneously and gleefully, reverting to the King James Version we each heard in our younger years, of Psalm 133: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”

Whatever else may be said, and with all the undeniable ups and downs, the bewildering pluses and minuses, this joint connection to the Psalms is proof positive the tie between Christians and Jews is imperishable and is here to stay. Speaking of which, there’s even a tie between them and Islam, but that’s a very weighty yet promising topic for another time, hopefully, very soon. You see, we find in the Qur’an (4:163) the assertion that one of God’s revelations is the Psalms of David. In sum, the

Psalms and the ways they have been used over the millennia say volumes about the changing interactions between Judaism and Christianity and, of course, about the two great religions themselves. In the meantime, it is worthy of note, they are continually coming up with new ways of bonding without being untrue to their own distinct core convictions.

An afterword. Jews and Christians constantly use the term hallelujah in their worship. Did you ever wonder where the term hallelujah comes from? No doubt a goodly number of you already know that it's a Hebrew exclamation meaning "Praise ye the LORD!" But I imagine there may even be a few of you who are also aware of the fortunate, happy fact that the ever-popular term hallelujah makes its premiere appearance in - guess where! - the book of Psalms.

So that hallelujah note is the one I'd like to end on.

Thank you so much for listening.

## Glossary

antiphon - in Christian worship, a verse, usually from the Psalms, sung as a response

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) - English Reformer and editor of the Book of Common Prayer

The Book of Common Prayer (1549) - service book of the Anglican/Episcopal Church

Dunash ben Labrat (920-990) - Hebrew grammarian, poet and biblical exegete from Morocco

Eucharist - Christian Sacrament commemorating the Last Supper in which bread and wine are consecrated and partaken of; Mass; Holy Communion

Gloria Patri - in Christian worship, a doxology acclaiming the Trinity at the end of a Psalm or a Canticle

Hallelujah - Hebrew for "Praise ye the LORD"; Latin spelling: alleluia

Hasid (plural: Hasidim) - member of a Jewish mystical sect founded in 18th-century Poland

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) - English Protestant theologian and hymn-writer

Kabbalat Shabbat - in Judaism, a service welcoming the Sabbath Friday at dusk

King James Version (1611) - English translation of the Bible carried out under James I; widely used for a long time in Protestant churches in English-speaking countries

Liturgy of the Hours - in Catholic worship, several services in the course of a day

Morning Prayer; Evening Prayer - the Anglican (Episcopal) and Lutheran abridgement of the Liturgical Hours

Shabbat - Hebrew for the Sabbath

Shema' - the Jewish confession of faith, affirming the Oneness of God (< Deuteronomy 6:4)

Tamid (plural: Temidim) - Hebrew for the perpetual daily offering (< Numbers 28:3-4)

tsalmavet - Hebrew for deep darkness, commonly mistranslated "shadow of death"

Yom Kippur - Hebrew for the Day of Atonement

Psalm 90 (King James Version)

1 Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.  
2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.  
3 Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.  
4 For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.  
5 Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up.  
6 In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.  
7 For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled.  
8 Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.  
9 For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told.  
10 The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.  
11 Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath.  
12 So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.  
13 Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.  
14 O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.  
15 Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.  
16 Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.  
17 And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

O God, Our Help in Ages Past (Isaac Watts)

O God, our help in ages past,  
our hope for years to come,  
our shelter from the stormy blast,  
and our eternal home:  
Under the shadow of thy throne,  
thy saints have dwelt secure;  
sufficient is thine arm alone,  
and our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,  
or earth received her frame,  
from everlasting thou art God,  
to endless years the same.  
A thousand ages in thy sight  
are like an evening gone;  
short as the watch that ends the night  
before the rising sun.  
Time, like an ever-rolling stream,  
bears all its sons away;  
they fly, forgotten, as a dream  
dies at the opening day.  
O God, our help in ages past,  
our hope for years to come,  
be thou our guide while troubles last,  
and our eternal home!