# ENGAGING SCRIPTURE IN A POSTMODERN MILIEU

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This article begins by summarising some key features of the postmodern milieu in which most westerners live today. It goes on to review in outline an empirical research programme, entitled a Psalm Journey, which I undertook between 2003 and 2004 in Edinburgh among a group of students with an interest in contemporary spirituality.[1] Next the article reviews Colin Greene and Martin Robinson's book *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination* which explores the hermeneutical issues involved in engaging with Scripture in postmodernity.[2] The final part of the article summarises the advantages of a meditative-intuitive engagement with psalmic texts as illustrated by the Psalm Journey[3]

## MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

It is commonplace today to hear it said that western culture has moved, or is in process of moving, out of modernity into postmodernity. Modernity has a range of manifestations, but is generally understood to be the worldview emerging from the eighteenth century Enlightenment (a project which was based on instrumental reason, the autonomy of the individual, and the idea of progress). Modernity assumes the existence of objective truth, which it regards as universal and discoverable by empirical enquiry. It doubts whether truth can be revealed by religion. Modernity expresses itself socially in industrialisation, bureaucratisation and secularisation.

Postmodernity, on the other hand, is seen both as a reaction against the rationalism and foundationalism of modernity and as a consequence

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1 My respondents defined spirituality as a longing of the human spirit for connection beyond the immediate; the personal pursuit of meaning or place and enlightenment.

2 C. Greene and M. Robinson, *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination, Faith in an Emerging Culture* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2008).

3 The understanding of Scripture engagement assumed in my research was as follows: 'Scripture engagement is interacting with the biblical text in ways that provide sufficient opportunity for the text to speak for itself. By means of this interaction readers and hearers learn to inhabit the narrative of the text and to respond to the unique claim it makes on their lives.'

of it, for which reason it is sometimes labelled 'late modernity.' It rejects the realist ontology and epistemology of modernity and considers the world to be a construct of culture and language. Postmodernity focuses on difference, considers the universal perspective of modernity to be an illusion, and is suspicious of truth claims made by science, philosophy and religion. It suspects all metanarratives, or master stories, and denies the possibility of human knowledge achieving certainty.[4] The Cartesian aphorism: 'I think, therefore I am' is replaced by the Derridean maxim: 'I don't know; I must believe.' Postmodernity creates space for faith, but not for assurance. An additional feature of postmodernity is historical scepticism. According to Hayden White, a postmodern historian, all historical accounts are 'verbal fictions.'[5] Furthermore, postmodernity privileges Freud's desiring libido over Descartes' thinking ego by giving preference to the sensuous over the cognitive.[6]

It is important to recognise that the widespread use of the term 'postmodernity' does not mean that modernity is obsolete. Modernity is still very much alive today as the force behind both technological advances and economic globalisation, which are such prominent drivers of early twenty-first century life. But in, with and under modernity, postmodernity is the condition of the history in which contemporary westerners participate. So today our society is both modern and postmodern. We find ourselves living 'in parentheses' between both worldviews.[7]

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4 C. Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), p. 2.

5 Butler, *Introduction*, p. 33; R. Appignesi and C. Garratt, *Introducing Postmodernism* (Icon Books: Cambridge, 1999), p. 152.

6 'Postmodern lifestyles that are highly attuned to consumerism give preference to the body over the mind, the id over the ego, the image over the word, the sensuous over the cognitive, the aesthetic over the rational, the symbolic and iconic over the utilitarian and practical' (Greene and Robinson, p. 31)

7 The phrase 'the condition of history' is taken from Kevin Vanhoozer who, in turn, derives it from the title of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). Vanhoozer clarifies his understanding of the phrase by saying 'postmodernity is not a specifiable moment on the timetable of history but a mood.' The phrase 'in parentheses' is also taken from Vanhoozer who borrows it from Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's *Postmodern Turn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). Best and Kellner amplify the expression by describing it as 'an interregnum period in which the competing regimes are engaged in an intense struggle for dominance' (p. 32). K. J. Vanhoozer, 'Theology and the condition of postmo-

My task in this article is to explore how, living in these parentheses, we might engage with the Bible in ways that are meaningful in early twenty-first century western society. At first sight, this task is formidable. How can the churches promote the Bible to a generation that is distrustful of all truth claims, that suspects all master stories as being instruments of the powerful to oppress the weak, and that assumes all historical narratives to be 'verbal fictions'? How can Bible agencies and other organisations produce helps and design programmes that will encourage postmodern nomads to explore God's Word and the claims it makes upon us?

## PSALM JOURNEY

I sought to address such questions in my doctoral research undertaken at the University of Edinburgh's School of Divinity between 2002 and 2007, in which I carried out an empirical programme of Scripture engagement using selected biblical psalms with a group of international students, most of whom were engaged in postgraduate studies in the University covering a wide range of disciplines, and all of whom were privately exploring contemporary spirituality. After conducting a pilot project among over sixty students, I invited twelve respondents to undertake a month-long 'Psalm Journey.' Only a small minority of my respondents were regularly active in church life. A majority had a nominal Christian background, while some belonged to other faiths: Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Ba'hai. The research was undertaken on the premise that respondents would allow the psalmic texts to speak for themselves. The 'helps' provided were minimal, briefly supplying historical, cultural and linguistic information that set the psalms in their original milieu. These 'helps' strictly adhered to 'no [doctrinal] note or comment,' a phrase which has been described as 'the Bible Society Movement's Fundamental Principle.'[8] The 'helps' consisted of a 'Minimal Hermeneutic' which I prepared for each of the six psalms, providing short annotations along with some open questions to serve as 'prompts' to meditation. The Minimal Hermeneutic eschewed any attempt to explain the meaning of the text. Its length corresponded to

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dernity: a report on knowledge (of God)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. by K. J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 9.

[8] David G. Burke, 'Text and Context: The Relevance and Viability of the Bible Society Movement's Fundamental Principle – "Without Doctrinal Note or Comment" – Past, Present and Future', *United Bible Societies Bulletin*, 194/195 (2002), p. 299.

the length of the psalm it related to, but was never more than two pages of A4. One of the Minimal Hermeneutics is found in Appendix 1.[9]

All the respondents regularly engaged with Scripture by meditating for at least ten minutes daily on the text of a complete specified psalm over a seven-day period. The exercise continued for a further two weeks with the focus each week being on a different psalm. Respondents kept a journal and at the end of each week they participated as a group in a *lectio divina* process during which they shared the fruits of their personal reflection over the previous seven days. A second group of respondents undertook a similar four-week programme interacting with a different group of psalms. An outline of the group meditative process followed in the Psalm Journey is found in Appendix 2. In all, six psalms were covered.[10] At the end of the exercise all respondents were interviewed one-to-one and encouraged to share frankly their interaction with the psalmic texts. Having given this brief outline of the Psalm Journey, I now wish to shift focus temporarily from the empirical to the epistemological, by exploring Greene and Robinson's claim that a specific hermeneutical pre-understanding is necessary in order to engage with Scripture appropriately and effectively today.

## METAVISTA

Greene and Robinson lean heavily on postliberalism (or narrative theology) in their preferred mode of engaging with the text of Scripture in a postmodern milieu. I have selected their book because it envisions cultural engagement with the Scripture narrative as dynamically enhancing the mission of the church and radically changing the societal imagination of the wider community.

I find much to commend in this book. First, it recognises that the Bible is narrative-shaped, and that its non-narrative texts—whether legal codes, wisdom literature, liturgical poetry, prophetic oracles, dominical

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[9] Generally the Minimal Hermeneutics were appreciated by respondents. In his follow-up interview one respondent said: 'I really enjoyed the "Minimal Hermeneutic." I did like having that much structure because, you know, when you first read the psalms, you can seem a bit lost in the text and not really know how to. At the same time, that's about all the structure I want. Anything more than that I sort of hesitate and shy away from.'

[10] These were Psalms 22, 30, 55, 73, 74, 126 respectively selected on the basis that they resonate with the dominant life values identified by my respondents: a desire to resolve pain; placing a high value on experience; being well thought of; engaging with ambiguity; suspicion of religious institutions; having a good time.

parables or apostolic letters—emerge from the overarching narrative and, therefore, are integral to it. Such recognition is, I believe, fundamental to engaging creatively with Scripture, which too often is popularly assumed to be primarily a book of theological ideas. An acknowledgement that the Bible's genus is narrative enables us to take advantage of those studies in narrative criticism revealing the art of biblical storytellers to enhance greatly our understanding of the biblical text.[11]

A second reason for applauding this book is its strong commendation of imaginative indwelling of the text of Scripture and its prioritising of this over analytical, inductive approaches that all too easily tempt us to become masters rather than servants of the text. Entering the biblical story is, indeed, key to creative engagement with it.[12] A third reason for welcoming *Metavista* is its affirmation that narrative is central to human identity formation. The authors recognise that making *storied sense* of our experienced world is a distinguishing feature of humans. This storied sense results in us readily resonating with narrative texts as catalysts in the process of meaning making.

A fourth reason for welcoming this book is its strong emphasis on the role of Holy Scripture in shaping the life-world of the people of God. For it is as the church discovers its vitality in, and lives its life out of, the text of Scripture, that it fosters a discursive Christianity with potential to impact national life. This leads to my fifth reason for commending Greene and Robinson's work: They recognise that the Bible must engage creatively with the culture of the reader if it is to gain recognition as public truth.[13] In this regard, the book helpfully offers an extensive review of trends and issues highlighted in contemporary cultural studies.

The authors explain that the signifier in the title—'Metavista'—was chosen to avoid 'the supposedly legitimating foundations of a metanarrative or a hurriedly revamped metaphysic,' and because it speaks 'from a relatively unclaimed space or "clearing" (to use Heidegger's suggestive

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11 R. Parry 'Narrative Criticism' in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation*, ed. by K. J. Vanhoozer (London: SPCK, 2005), pp. 528-31.

12 According to Nicholas Wolterstorff we inhabit the world of the biblical narrative when 'the story that most decisively shapes our lives must be the biblical story.' Nicholas Wolterstorff 'Living within a Text', in *Faith and Narrative*, ed. by K. Yandell (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 212.

13 '[I]n order for a particular faith to exercise discursive power, some aspect of its basic narrative of salvation and redemption needs to have penetrated crucial areas of contemporary culture, be that the books and magazines people read, the television and movies they watch, or the lifestyle innovations they adopt and value.' Greene and Robinson, p. xvi.

phrase)'.[14] The authors claim that in the midst of today's accelerating cultural change and constant transition, it is possible to discern 'the indistinct but nevertheless emerging culture of the post-postmodern' which they refer to as 'the new "metavista" culture of innovation and imagination'. They go on: 'This newly emerging cultural space is a truly global phenomenon because it is not simply or even mainly a philosophical or an ideas project. Metavista is also an economic and socio-political reality that is forming into a new narrative of liberation.'[15] It's possible that this new narrative can effect dramatic change from the bottom up: 'We now live in a time when the previous divisions between faith and reason, fact and value, private and public, high and low culture, science and religion – distinctions loved by modernity – no longer apply. The collapse of these previous distinctions has made us all heirs of a new age of imagination, indeed, an age where the possibilities of reimagining our own story opens up exciting possibilities for those who were previously categorized as the marginalized and the dispossessed.'[16]

In this Metavista, the church is called to live adventurously at the intersection of three different and at times competing narratives. These are: (1) the creational two-testament narrative unity and diversity which the Bible recounts; (2) the narrative of historical Christianity within which each and every individual church should stand; (3) the wider cultural narratives which a truly global world makes freely available to us.[17] The authors are convinced that to do this, the church will be required to move beyond the hermeneutical stances adopted by liberalism and evangelicalism both of which they claim have made dangerous liaisons with modernity:

> Living in this kind of comprehensive narrative, creatively improvising on the original script, and at the same time revisiting the socio-political ramifications of the whole story renders the old Christendom divisions between liberals and evangelicals not only superfluous but more than a little self-serving. To a certain extent the new theological movements, like radical orthodoxy, postliberalism, some of the new Catholic and Reformed theological repositionings, and those reappropriating the theology of Karl Barth in a postmodern context, have all left that outmoded dichotomy behind.[18]

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14 Greene and Robinson, p. xxix.
15 Greene and Robinson, p. 21.
16 Greene and Robinson, p. 44.
17 Greene and Robinson, p. 225.
18 Greene and Robinson, p. 234.

The liberal-evangelical standoff is considered obsolete and is summarily dismissed by the authors as the 'last theological vestige of Christendom.'[19]

The postliberal turn underlying the book creates a strong focus on Scripture as literary narrative, and on the need for readers, hearers, and viewers to become involved in the task of meaning-making by participating in the world of the biblical narrative and reconfiguring it according to their own imaginative reality.[20] Greene and Robinson opt for four main biblical stories or 'subplots'—Creation, Israel, Jesus the Christ, and the Church—all of which, they allege, are *unfinished* stories that are accordingly retold and redrafted through the others, and consequently invite our participation at every stage of the journey.[21] The truth and meaning of the overall narrative of Scripture, we are told, does not depend on its conformity to a particular historical state of affairs, or to any specific doctrinal formulation. Rather, the question of truth and meaning is an intratextual issue. Truth and meaning are found in the reformulation (*perichoresis* or mutual indwelling) of each story in the other and the recapitulation of the same plot density in each.

While freely acknowledging that there is much to learn from *Metavista*, there are, however, certain aspects of the book that raise questions as to its overall usefulness as a resource for contemporary Scripture engagement. Specifically, I have four reservations which I will pose in the form of questions.

## RESERVATIONS

First, might the approach advocated in *Metavista* dumb down the authority of the biblical text by privileging interpretation? This question prompts a multitude of related questions: Is the text Scripture only when reconfigured and read in a certain way? What are the standards of interpretation?[22] The authors recognise that engaging with the Scripture narrative by reconfiguring it to our own imaginative reality inevitably

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19 Greene and Robinson, p. 70.

20 Greene and Robinson, p. 114.

21 Greene and Robinson, p. 118. The authors regard the Fall from a state of perfection, as 'an over-literal interpretation of what is neither cosmology nor biology, but a story' (p. 120). 'An over-individualistic concentration on the Fall as a second story instead of an episode within the first story results in a stunted engagement with the biblical text which almost inevitably leads to an interpretation that individual salvation was the whole purpose of God's creative act' (p. 122).

22 Cf. K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text? The Bible, the reader, and the morality of literary knowledge* (Leicester: IVP, 1998).

creates tension in Christian communities between the commonality of the text and the diversity of interpretation. However, they deem such diversity to be appropriate because the text of Scripture itself contains various voices.[23] For the authors, it seems to be the consensual reading of the community that takes precedence. The inference I take from this is that the interpretation of the community and its tradition tend to exercise a higher authoritative role in the church than does the text of Scripture itself. The distinction in the Reformed tradition between the 'supreme standard' of the church (i.e. Scripture) and its 'subordinate standards' (i.e. the church's confession and catechisms) appears to be elided into a single churchly authority.[24]

Second, does the focus on finding meaning in our interaction with the biblical narrative rather than in the narrative itself, prejudice the factuality of events featured in the biblical story? The section of the book entitled 'Reconfiguring the story' suggests the answer may be positive. For it reflects narrative theology's insistence that the relation of the biblical narrative to history, is irrelevant to our engaging with the text. N. T. Wright's model of engaging with Scripture as a five-act drama[25] is criticised because it 'remains fundamentally a historical project and not a literary narrative description of a multidimensional story.'[26] Apparently narrative can be indwelt while history cannot:

> [T]he church lives in the traces, the still reverberating resonances, the dramatic configurations, of the story of Creation, the Fall, Israel and Jesus, but we can no longer personally or collectively indwell those worlds because they are assigned to the vicissitudes of history. This is the fundamental difference between history and narrative. Narrative allows the contemporary reader to indwell the whole story, because each episode of the story is recapitulated, expropriated and reconfigured in the event of the reading and in the collision of the narrative with the context of the reader.[27]

In my view such a sharp distinction between historical narrative and literary narrative demands greater justification than Greene and Robinson offer. The biblical narratives undoubtedly differ significantly from modern historical writing, but there is strong internal evidence in biblical texts of claims to be historiographic. A plain reading of passages like

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23 Greene and Robinson, p. 217.

24 There is surprisingly little discussion in the book about biblical authority.

25 N. T. Wright, 'How can the bible be authoritative?', in *Vox Evangelica*, 21 (1991), p. 18.

26 Greene and Robinson, pp. 110-111.

27 Greene and Robinson, p. 111.

Luke 1:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 surely would understand them to be alluding to factual events in time-space reality.[28]

Third, is the world of the Bible understood as being continuous with our world? The answer in *Metavista* seems to be both 'yes and no' as is suggested by a supportive quotation from Amos Wilder:

> If we ask a prestigious body of modern critics about the relation of the story-world to the real world, they will reply that it is a false question. For one thing the story goes its own way and takes us with it; the storyteller is inventing, not copying…. Our language-worlds are the only worlds we know.[29]

If in fact both these worlds are cultural linguistic constructs, then Wilder is correct. But if we reject a postliberal stance and adopt a realist ontology and epistemology the question is valid and the answer must be 'Yes'—i.e. the world of the Bible *is* continuous with our world. The Wilder quotation highlights that narrative theology has its limits for those who believe that realities exist outside the human mind.

Fourth, does the kind of cultural Scripture engagement advocated in *Metavista* compromise the capacity of Scripture to critique culture holistically? *Metavista* is, in many ways, a commendable attempt to engage postmodern culture by demonstrating that many of the features of postmodernity resonate with the message of Scripture. The book also convincingly demonstrates that biblical values challenge many aspects of modernity. However, the overall cultural appraisal is less than even-handed. The weaknesses of modernity are highlighted while its strengths tend to be overlooked. On the other hand, the reverse is the case in the book's analysis of postmodernity. There is a lapse of equilibrium here. For all cultures exhibit to a greater or lesser extent dissonance as well as resonance with biblical values. To curtail the Bible's critical faculty surely compromises the counter-cultural dynamic of any engagement between the Bible and culture.

In light of these four questions I wonder how helpful at grassroots level Greene and Robinson's commendable desire to facilitate postmodern cultural Scripture engagement will be. The cultural engagement on offer tends to be rather blinkered in apparently forgetting that features of human sin as well as features of divine grace are evident in postmodernity as well as in modernity. Furthermore, *Metavista* appears to be in danger of foreclosing for readers any free decision concerning the nature of Holy Scripture. Greene and Robinson take evangelicals and liberals to task for

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[28] It is surprising that the authors make only passing reference to historiography.

[29] A. Wilder, 'Story and Story-World', *Interpretation*, 37 (1983), pp. 353-64.

imposing on others their own pre-understanding, yet they themselves may have unwittingly fallen into a similar trap by imposing their own pre-understanding on the biblical text.

## MEDITATIVE ENGAGEMENT

At this point I will leave *Metavista* and return to Psalm Journey. The Psalm Journey differs from the Metavista project in two respects. First it was an empirical study, and, second, it sought to facilitate an intuitive interaction with Scripture. Its theoretical structure sought to curtail third-party hermeneutical intrusion by offering only minimal guidance to participants.[30] The text of each psalm was set before respondents and they were invited to meditate on it, to interact imaginatively with it, and to discover the extent to which it might authenticate itself in their experience as a religious classic.[31]

An open, meditative engagement with Scripture was encouraged in the hope that it would enable postmodern readers to overcome both their suspicion of the Bible as a metanarrative and their wariness of being told what to believe, thereby enabling them to approach the biblical text with a measure of confidence and ease. The ancient meditative process of *lectio divina* was adopted.[32] Traditionally *lectio divina* has been practised in Christian small group meditation with a focus on prayer and communion with God, and involves at least four steps.[33] These steps can be adapted, as they were in the Psalm Journey, to facilitate a conversation with a biblical text by any group of people desiring to develop their spirituality. By creating time and space for biblical words and images to catch the imagination, *lectio divina* enables us 'to *hear* and *feel* the text as well as see it'.[34]

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30 An example of this guidance is found in Appendix 1.

31 For the concept of religious classics see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 248-49. Following Gadamar, Tracy regards texts like the Bible as 'religious classics' which are self-authenticating.

32 *Lectio divina* is 'spiritual (lit. divine) reading'.

33 In the first step participants listen for a word or a phrase that demands attention. Second, they ruminate on that word or phrase, allowing it to interact with their thoughts, hopes, memories and desires. Third, they converse with God in prayers of consecration and/or petition. Fourth, they rest in the presence of God, who has used his word as a means of inviting them to accept his transforming embrace. Luke Dysinger, 'Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina'; www.valyermo.com/Id-art.html, accessed: 16 September 2005.

34 E. R. Wendland, *Analyzing the Psalms*, 2nd edn. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2002), p. 205. Cf. A. Berlin's observation that a Hebrew poem con-

Meditative reading ensures that both brain hemispheres are involved in interacting with the text.[35] It has the additional advantage of reaching the parts that analytical reading cannot.[36] Plain descriptive speech and rational argument are regarded by psychologists as inadequate to evoke right brain activity which is a vital function of human personality. Traditionally the practice of *lectio divina* has been coherent because in patristic and medieval times the symbols in the biblical text were understood within 'a stable tradition of interpretation established on other grounds'.[37] Antony Thiselton—following Ricoeur—argues that practitioners of *lectio divina* who are outside or on the margins of given interpretive traditions—as were most of my Psalm Journey respondents—can be saved from succumbing to self-deception and promoting self-interest by adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion with regard to their own readings.[38]

A further advantage of meditative reading is that its openness is particularly helpful when engaging audiences which may be endued with a healthy postmodern fear of being manipulated by authority figures, be they preachers or commentators.[39] Not only does meditative reading help us allay postmodern suspicions, it also resonates with some postmodern approaches to literature. For example, Thiselton points out that the prac-

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veys thought through 'a special structuring of language that calls attention to the "how" of the message as well as to the "what"'. ('Introduction to Hebrew Poetry', in *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV, ed. by L. E. Kock (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), p. 302).

35 In popular psychology left brain functions are regarded as analytical and logical and find expression in the attempts of many respondents to go behind the text seeking its authorial intention. Right brain functions are taken to be holistic rather than analytical and intuitive rather than logical (*Left Brain, Right Brain*, rev. ed. by S. P. Springer and G. Deutsch (New York, NY: W. H. Freeman, 1985)). When one respondent indicated she would have liked 'to know far more about exactly what was going on and who was attacking who' her left brain was at work. But when she says that, while listening to a sung version of Psalm 73, the repetitive plaintive call of verse 1-22 'is washed aside by this one line "I remain with you continually,"' it is her right brain that is dominant. (The line 'I remain with you continually' is not from the NRSV, but *Sing Psalms: New Metrical Version of the Book of Psalms*, Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland, 2003).

36 Inner experience can be interpreted only indirectly by diagnostic methods (A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p. 359).

37 Thiselton, p. 578.

38 Thiselton, pp. 575-82.

39 J. R. Middleton and B. J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it used to be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 69-79.

tice of *lectio divina* in medieval monastic life 'allows gentle contemplation to move amidst a kaleidoscope of ever-changing biblical imagery in a way which almost anticipates the post-modernist notion of textual play'.[40]

Most of the Psalm Journey participants were very sympathetic to the values of postmodernism, yet all of them were prepared to engage with the psalms as 'classic texts'. Furthermore, their meditative reading of these texts encouraged them to enter imaginatively the narrative of each psalm, exploring the world within the text before attempting to contextualise the psalm in their own experience.[41] Here the strong metaphors of Hebrew poetry proved to be a real asset.[42] Of the twenty-eight words or phrases identified in the psalm texts by respondents as having impacted them, eighteen (i.e. almost two-thirds) are figurative language.[43] Respondents' focus on metaphorical and symbolic terms in the psalms made it easier

[40] Thiselton, p. 142. The openness of my audience to a meditative approach validates the traditional practice of Bible Societies to refrain from advocating doctrinal interpretations when providing notes and comments. For Psalm Journey respondents the attractiveness of the traditional practice is that it opens up the text for readers rather that telling them what it means or demands.

[41] I am using the term imagination in the holistic sense Vanhoozer gives it: 'The imagination is not merely the faculty of fantasy—the ability to see things not there—but rather a means of seeing what is there (e.g. the meaning of the whole) that senses alone are unable to observe (and that the propositional alone is unable to state).' 'The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology', in *Evangelical Futures: a Conversation on Theological Methods*, ed. by J. G. Stackhouse (Leicester: IVP, 2000), p. 84.

[42] It is not uncommon for 'metaphor' to be used as a general category for figurative language as well as a particular figure of speech. See G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Duckworth, London, 1980), pp 131-83; A. L. Warren-Rothlin, 'Body Idioms and the Psalms', in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. by P. S. Johnston and D. G. Firth (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), p. 200. Hence the term covers simile and hyperbole. Anthropomorphism is also included: 'When the Bible talks about God, it must speak by necessity, metaphorically' (Berlin, *op cit*, p. 312). According to R. Alter, the Bible's figurative language should be seen in the context of literary genre and literary symbolism. Pronounced reliance on figurative language is one of the formal resources of Hebrew poetry, along with parallelism and hyperbole (R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), pp. 160-1).

[43] Parallelism, the predominant feature of Hebrew poetry, was identified by Robert Lowth in 1753, and is defined as 'the repetition of similar or related semantic content or grammatical structure in adjacent lines and verses' (Berlin, *op cit,* p. 304).

for them to find themselves in the texts. Such verbal imagery underlines the universal appeal of the psalms.[44] In particular it helps to 'encourage listeners (or readers) to mentally conceive and emotionally experience for themselves a particular situation or event by supplying them with a vivid picture or even an entire scene into which they can enter by way of their imagination'.[45] One Psalm Journey respondent tells how meditating on Psalm 126 helped her to contemplate something she previously had thought impossible: 'You dream about it. All tell you it's impossible. Then it happens.' This respondent was not alone. Others also frequently referred to the new perspective gained from their meditation, confirming Alter's observation that Hebrew poetry is 'a particular way of imagining the world'.[46] The Psalm Journey evidence demonstrates that metaphors by catching the imagination, enable readers and listeners to engage with the text intuitively as well as logically.[47]

Such imaginative meditation on the psalms prompted Psalm Journey participants to ask questions of the text. The female respondent who wrote 'I wanted to know far more about exactly what was going on and who was attacking whom,' was in Ricoeur's terms, seeking to explore the world behind the text. In addition, respondents allowed the texts to question them, illustrating the 'critical correlation' that David Tracy envisages taking place between readers and classic texts, resulting in 'a critical dialogue between the implicit questions and explicit answers of the Christian classics and the explicit questions and implicit answers of contemporary cultural experiences and practices'.[48] The Psalm Journey suggests that

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44 Cf J. Goldingay, *Praying the Psalms* (Bramcote: Grove, 1993), p. 14.

45 E. R. Wendland, 'A Literary Approach to Biblical Text Analysis' in *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, ed. by T. Wilt (Manchester: St Jerome Press, 2003), p. 218.

46 Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, p. 151.

47 'The biblical texts are concerned not only to teach truth by means of logical propositions, but to display the truth to the whole person with a veritable arsenal of imaginative communicative strategies' ('Biblical Literature and Literary Criticism,' a presentation by Kevin J. Vanhoozer to The National Bible Society of Scotland, 1990). Cf. W. Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), p. 3; W. Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: St Mary's Press, 1982), pp. 23-31, who contends that Hebrew poetic metaphor, in marked contrast with the positivistic language of 'our prose-flattened world,' stimulates us to give full play to our imagination.

48 D. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 43-63.

rumination and induction can complement one another in engaging with the Bible.

The Psalm Journey also demonstrated the extraordinary potential of the Bible to provide a perspective for its readers to view and respond to contemporary events. Most respondents were comfortable reflecting on what they had seen, heard or read on the news media while meditating on the psalms.[49] They acknowledged that meditation on the psalms provided a window on the world. The war in Iraq, tensions in Zimbabwe, the perceived unfairness of Danish immigration policy, suffering experienced in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, setting fire to places of worship, and economic exploitation by big business, all feature in the group transcripts and personal journals. The concern about contemporary issues was also focused on powerful politicians of the time, like George W Bush, Tony Blair, Ariel Sharon and Saddam Hussein. One respondent wrote in his journal: 'Words [in Psalm 74] have been jumping out at me, I have been finding parallels to events the BBC or *The Guardian* tell me about daily.'[50]

Finally, during the Psalm Journey respondents found meditative reading playing a creative role in their self-formation. They testified to the therapeutic value of psalmic *lectio divina* in coping with work stress, depression, and reliving the devastation inflicted by a broken relationship. Unsurprisingly, respondents reacted negatively to the vengeance of the poet in Psalm 55. On the other hand, three of them wondered whether the imprecatory prayer of Psalm 74:11, asking God to destroy those who had so ruthlessly desecrated the Jerusalem temple, may be more therapeutic than vindictive.[51]

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[49] '[T]he poetry of the lament psalms has power to reshape our world'. W. L. Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), p. 293.

[50] Two days later in his journal and with reference to hostilities in Israel-Palestine, he asks: 'When will we all agree to love?' He recognises that action on his part was called for. The picture of 'enemies occupying a people's holy place and making a once holy sanctuary unholy' makes him aware that he needs to get involved in his synagogue's Monday meetings and have a say in how synagogue funds are disbursed internationally.

[51] Brueggemann and Goldingay contend that the psalms of vengeance can help to reduce and even eliminate, human rage and retaliation. They suggest that victims can be set free from the power of the deep-seated hate that victimisation often incites, by reflecting on a psalm of vengeance and then reciting it as a prayer through which, in effect, they hand over their anger and hatred to God and leave it there. Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, pp. 57-68; Goldingay, *Praying the Psalms*, p. 15.

## CONCLUSION

In general the Psalm Journey research has demonstrated that, in a postmodern milieu, effective Scripture engagement is not dependent on foreclosing readers' understanding of the nature of Scripture. Rather, the experience of my respondents—although small and non-randomly selected—validates an open, meditative, and naive reading of the biblical psalms as being beneficial. This benefit was facilitated by the following factors:

- A 'hermeneutic of *imagination*' effectively complemented the 'hermeneutic of interrogation' that tends to prevail in current inductive approaches to biblical texts.

- Readers, by engaging in a critical *correlation* with the biblical text—asking it questions and listening to the questions the text is putting to them—entered into a meaningful and inventive conversation with the text.

- Meditative Scripture engagement facilitated *contextualisation* of the text in relation to issues arising in the public square as well as those affecting the private sphere, fulfilling Calvin's metaphor of the Scriptures as spectacles.

- The strong metaphors of psalmic poetry were a major resource in facilitating the *self-formation* of respondents.

For these reasons, psalms from the Israelite Iron Age read, recited and heard, offer postmodern seekers an alternative, *samizdat* spirituality that opens a way to bring protest as well as praise, complaint as well as thanksgiving, ambiguity as well as confidence, into the sanctuary of God. These four features of the Psalm Journey call to our attention a robust spirituality many churches to all intents and purposes have abandoned.[52] It may be that a new generation of seekers living at, or beyond, the edge of our religious institutions will restore to the 21st century mainstream this ancient form of spirituality.

[52] R. Davidson, *Courage to Doubt: Exploring an Old Testament Theme* (London: SCM, 1983), pp. 1-17; W. Brueggemann, *The Psalms in the Life of Faith*, ed. by P. D. Miller (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), pp. 67-69.

APPENDIX 1

***Minimal Hermeneutic: Psalm 126***
Inter-textual Readings: 2 Kings 25 (the exile); Ezra 1 (the return).

**Cues**
Class of Psalm: *A Song of Ascents*: The Songs of Ascent (Pss 120-134) appear to be designed for pilgrims travelling to the three annual festivals observed in Jerusalem in which ancient Jews celebrated their faith.

**the LORD** (v. 1): 'LORD' translates the special word the ancient Israelites had for God.

**restored the fortunes** (v. 1): a reference to the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylonia in 538 BCE. The half-century-long exile was an intensely traumatic experience for the Jews.

**Zion** (v. 1): the place name of the temple mount in Jerusalem. The first temple, built by King Solomon in the 10th century BCE, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, when the elite of the nation was taken by their captors into exile. A second temple was built by the returning exiles in 520. The site is presently occupied by the Islamic Al-Aqsa mosque and its shrine, the Dome of the Rock.

**and we rejoiced** (v. 3b): This is the central sentence in the psalm. Verbs preceding it are rendered in the past tense; those coming after it, in the present or future tense.

**watercourses in the Negeb** (v. 4b): the seasonal flash floods that make the dry wadis of the south of Israel run with water.

**those who sow in tears** (v. 5): the post-exilic period was a time of hardship. Attempts by the returned exiles to re-build city and temple were opposed by locals (Nehemiah 4); in addition, they suffered from drought (Haggai 1:6-11; 2:16-19) and locusts (Joel 1:1-2:27).

Prompts

- The repetition of 'fortunes' (v. 1) in v. 4 has prompted the following comment: 'What the pilgrims remember about the past they pray for in the present. […] They need ever-recurring rhythms of renewal that come like the seasonal freshets that make the dry watercourses of the Negeb run with water.'[53] Be open to the text of this ancient song renewing your soul!

[53] James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 400.

- Allow the images of this song—dreams and streams, sowing and reaping—to run in your imagination and see where they lead!

- Try to understand the joy of the returning exiles by reflecting on times in your life when you 'were like those who dreamed' (vv. 1-2).

- 'Those who sow in tears' (v. 5). Some of the frustrations of sowing may be appreciated by reading Jesus' Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-15). Reflect on the devastating impact in the developing world of failed harvests and unfair trade agreements.

- '[They] shall come home with shouts of joy' (v. 6). 'Joy builds on the past and borrows from the future'[54]. In your imagination attempt to borrow from your future! When you do this what do you see?

## APPENDIX 2

### *The Lectio Divina Process adapted for The Psalm Journey*

1. Prepare
   - Sit in silence with your eyes closed, let your body relax.
2. Listen to the Psalm.
   - As the psalm is read twice, listen for the word or phrase that strikes you.
   - During the moments of silence that follow the second reading, repeat the phrase softly (or silently) to yourself.
   - The leader will say 'Let us share our word or phrases.' When it is your turn in the circle, speak your phrase aloud. Say only this word or phrase with no comments or elaboration.
   - You may say 'I pass' if you wish, at any point in this process.
3. Ask yourself 'How is my life impacted by this word?'
   - The psalm will now be read by a different person.
   - Consider how the word or phrase connects to your life. Sometimes this will be an idea or a thought; at other times it will be an image or some other impression.
   - You will have two or three minutes for this meditation.

[54] Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, 2nd edn (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books), p. 99.

- The leader will say, 'Let us share our reflections' and you will share in one or two sentences the connection between your phrase and your life.
- Again, do not elaborate, explain, or justify what you sensed.

4. Ask yourself 'Which of the resources provided helped the text to impact my life?'
   - You will have one or two minutes to reflect.
   - The leader will invite you to identify one of the resources and to describe in one or two sentences how it helped.
   - You may say 'I pass' if you wish.
5. Ask yourself 'Did the text of the psalm provide for you a window on the world?'
   - You will have two or three minutes to reflect.
   - The leader will invite you to highlight one news item of the past week which you've reflected on in the light of the psalm.
   - You may say 'I pass' if you wish.
6. Ask yourself 'Which extract from my journal do I wish to share with the group?'
   - You will have two or three minutes to reflect
   - The leader will invite you to read an extract of your choosing.
   - You may say 'I pass' if you wish.
7. Ask yourself 'Am I being invited to respond?'
   - The psalm will now be read for a third time (by yet another person).
   - Consider whether you are being invited to respond in some way in the next few days: 'Am I being encouraged to do something?'
   - You will have two or three minutes of silence for meditation.
   - The leader will say, 'Let us share our responses.'
   - When it is your turn, share in one or two sentences, without elaboration, the invitation you are being given.
8. Conclude
   - Sit in silence with your eyes closed reflecting on the psalm and your interaction with it, and committing yourself to do what the psalm has invited you to do.