

# INTRODUCTION

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If one seeks a starting point outside the immediate topics of this excellent introduction to the multifaceted presence of the Psalms in the religious, intellectual, and cultural life of medieval Christendom, perhaps one such point lies in the writings of Hugh of St-Victor, a twelfth-century regular canon of the Abbey of St-Victor at Paris.

Hugh's *Chronicon* (an extensive compilation of tables of genealogies, chronologies, terms, and the like meant to provide the basic information for students reading the Bible "ad historiam") has a preface that describes the techniques of an "art of memory," which Hugh commends by suggesting an immediately useful application.<sup>1</sup> Unlike his classical predecessors or mendicant successors in the art of memory tradition, Hugh did not suggest an application related to either the classical tradition of public oratory or the equally public tradition of mendicant preaching. Nor did he, like Raymond Lull, find an esoteric relation between the art of memory and a universal philosophy/theology. Instead, Hugh suggested the art would be useful for memorizing the texts of the Psalms. With the Psalms memorized so that the number of a Psalm calls up the opening verse, which "leads" to the remaining verses of the Psalm "stored" in the memory, there is no need to page through a book to find the Psalm text. One need only run through the Psalm numbers mentally and locate the text. This "application" underscores the significance of memorizing the Psalter in medieval ecclesiastical culture and leads us in two directions: (1) monks (and the canons of St-Victor) chanting the entire Psalter from memory as a major part of the weekly cycle of the Divine Office, and (2) the continuing presence of the Psalms as remembered words and written text in biblical commentary and doctrinal works in medieval schools (of which St-Victor was one) and universities, and in the sermon tradition as well.

Whatever the literary/religious origins of the Psalms, for medieval

men and women the Psalms were divinely inspired songs written by King David. The Psalms not only reflected the joy and sadness of David's own life, with its oscillations between conquest, sickness, betrayal, divine intervention, despair, infidelity, joy, and steadfastness; the Psalms were also seen as a true compendium of Christian theology, words of praise for the Triune God, a sure guide for an upright life, and a vast collection of poetic texts that could become one's own personal words of prayer in all seasons and conditions of the human pilgrimage through this life.

In their medieval (and early-modern) usage the Psalms show a remarkable ability to move between the public and the private, the corporate and the individual, the formulaic and the more spontaneous aspects of life. It may come as less than a total surprise that in the works of the twelfth-century Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, 20% of the biblical citations and allusions come from the Psalms; the four Gospels make up 26%, with Isaiah (4%), Romans (6%), and I Corinthians (5%), the next largest.<sup>2</sup> Bernard was, of course, a monk thoroughly immersed in the recitation of the Divine Office, a thought-world shaped by Psalm texts. It is perhaps more surprising to discover, in Marie Anne Mayeski's contribution to this volume, that Dhuoda, an educated, mid-ninth-century noble laywoman, used the Psalms to shape, support, and "validate" the sage practical moral advice that she provided to prepare her son William for his role in Carolingian feudal society. Likewise, we discover in these pages that English-language psalters profoundly shaped moral discourse in late-medieval England among both Catholic and Lollard communities of belief and practice. What Michael Kuczynski calls "psalm language" provided a subtly woven fabric of interrelationships between public exhortation, social ethics, and personal reflection and action. The "words" of David became effective words for groups and individuals as they made their way through the moral landscape of this world, bound for a higher destination.

The first essay in this book, George Brown's study of Anglo-Saxon-glossed Latin psalters, takes us directly into the monastic "school" in which young boys were taught Latin by reading (and memorizing) the Psalms, the massive Latin biblical/liturgical text that would occupy so many hours of their lives as professional religious in medieval society. The fact that sumptuous and expensive psalters had textual glosses added in the vernacular (Anglo-Saxon and later Anglo-Norman) tells us something about negotiating languages, cultural identities, and educational programs in a church whose public language was "foreign" and yet needed to be "familiar." Joseph Dyer's contribution takes the reader into the vast background of practices and perceptions lying behind the use of the Psalms in the daily liturgy of monastic communi-

ties. What role(s), beyond formal expression and ritual, were the Psalms expected to play in the lives, thoughts, and actions of those who chanted the verses in long hours of liturgical services that were deemed essential of the life of not only monasteries but Christian society in general? How was an ancient text “appropriated” in meaning for people living in a far different world from that of the Second Temple of the Jewish people? The answers lie in cultural perceptions and religious practice, for the Psalms were “useful” both as publicly enacted prayer, intoned by monks on behalf of all, and as private expressions of individual desire and praise. Other uses and influences of the Psalms are found in the essays in this volume that examine the influence of English-language psalters in the later Middle Ages and the production of printed fifteenth-century psalters on the Continent. In the case of the English-language psalters, Michael Kuczynski shows, with telling effect, that psalmody could be “a private practice with a profoundly public significance and effect.” Richard Rolle’s English psalter with commentary and a “heavily glossed Wycliffite psalter” are both shown to draw on earlier interpreters (Augustine, Peter Lombard, Aquinas) in order to provide their readers with the tools to make these Davidic “songs” available as a private/public text of deep moral significance through the continuing influence of “Psalm speech” in everyday life. Mary Kay Duggan’s detailed study of the printing of psalters takes us into the worlds of literacy, book production and book buying, books for communal use in liturgy (large) and for individuals in that same liturgy (small), and the continuity of the liturgical arrangement of psalters in the face of incipient religious reform. The massive proliferation of copies of printed liturgical psalters suggests a lay market for books that allowed literate folk to participate in the daily cycle of Psalms and other texts of the Divine Office. As the author indicates, there is much to be learned about continuity, and discontinuity, in worship and belief by examining the use of the Psalter in the increasingly diverse groupings of late-medieval and early-modern Christian traditions in Europe. Luther, Bucer, Calvin, and other reformers saw the Psalms as central to the worship experience of all Christians.

Theresa Gross-Diaz takes us into the “workshop” of the cathedral schools of Laon and Paris in the twelfth century, where Gilbert of Poitiers developed his commentary on the Psalms. Traditional and innovative, Gilbert’s commentary took a major step in bringing the Psalms out of the enclosure of the monastic cloister into the public arena of scholastic discussion and debate. Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas would both follow Gilbert’s in commenting on the Psalms. Gilbert did more than comment, however. As Gross-Diaz so ably shows, Gilbert developed a creative cross-referencing and indexing system for guiding the reader to Psalms in which specific themes were elaborated and for

grouping common thematic materials in the commentary. His Psalm commentary was an important step in the process of organizing and “indexing” the accumulated heritage of Bible commentary and theological reflection from the preceding centuries. As Gross-Diaz notes, Gilbert’s commentary and system of symbols provided “a map designed to chart a way through the vast reserve of wisdom contained in the Psalms.”

Did the Psalms play a role in the lay culture of the Middle Ages? The *Liber manualis* written by Dhouda, a noble laywoman who lived in ninth-century France, encourages us to think that they did. Certainly this mother who wrote a book of moral guidance for her son gives us striking evidence of the sophisticated knowledge and skill that a non-cleric (and female) reader/writer could bring to the use of the Psalms in moral discourse. Using the Psalms to provide interpretation and validation for her ethical instructions based on the gospel beatitudes, Dhouda reveals a perceptive understanding of the Psalms and a keen ability to employ them as a compend of Christian doctrine ancillary to Jesus’ teaching as found in the evangelists.

Nancy van Deusen and Marcia Colish bring the insights of a liturgical scholar and an intellectual historian, respectively, to bear on the text of a liturgical sequence, *Promissa mundo gaudia*. Sequences, the authors argue, are like Psalms in that they bridge major portions of the Divine Office in the way that Psalms bridge the two testaments. For medieval Christians the Psalms were both Old Testament texts and, in their deeper meaning, texts that manifested the whole body of Christian theology found in the New Testament. The confluence of musical style, exegetical/theological tradition, and liturgical use as reflected in the sequence reveals much about the way in which Psalm texts and sequence texts unite theological reflection and personal experience in the public ritual of liturgical celebration.

Finally, the literary evocation of David—poet *par excellence*—of the Bible in the Irish poetic tradition as analyzed by Joseph Falaky Nagy presents a subtle and profound example of the interpenetration of what we would call today “religious” and “secular” themes and images in literature. The status of the poet, perceptions of David as poet, sinner, and “saint,” the exchange of poetry and gifts, the place of patronage, and the relation of praise of God and praise of women all have an important role in grasping the social context and subtle meaning of Celtic poetry. The poet Dfydd (David) ap Gwilym draws out implications of David as a poet, while the gift of a poem by Dallám Forgaill evokes from St. Columba (Colam cille) the comment that “Christ himself purchased three fifties of poems (the Psalms) from David.” David and his “songs” again show their power to bridge cultures, evoke several levels of mean-

ing, and provide “old” words that express personal experiences in profound ways.

These essays offer a broad sample, as stated earlier, of topics related to the presence and influence of the Psalms in Western medieval Christendom. Whether one considers public performance, personal devotion, scholastic study, or literary expression, the Psalms were not merely one element in the mosaic of medieval culture; they were a defining and shaping element not only in the Middle Ages, but well into the early modern era. A Calvinist holding her printed psalter in hand while singing metrical Psalms in a whitewashed Swiss church has more than an ephemeral link with the cloistered monk in an English monastery introducing a young oblate to the Latin text via an Anglo-Saxon gloss so that he will be able to chant the “foreign” text with understanding. Both are engaged, in their different ways, with the performative use of an ancient text. And, as this collection of essays so well demonstrates, that ancient text appeared in a variety of guises in cloisters, schools, courts, lay literature of guidance, poetry, grand cathedrals, simple parish churches, and clandestine Lollard meetings—where it was a privileged sacred text, an object of scholarly examination, a mine of theological and ethical precepts, a collection of powerful poetic evocations of the human condition and divine mercy, and a text written out, meditated on, recited in public, and recollected in silence. One hopes that these essays will assist the readers in recovering some sense of this pervasive and varied presence of the songs of King David—the Psalter—in medieval Christendom.

## NOTES

1. Latin text of preface, W. M. Green, ed. “Hugo of St. Victor: *De tribus circumstantiis gestorum*,” *Speculum* 18 (1943): 484–93. See Grover A. Zinn Jr., “Hugh of St. Victor and the Art of Memory,” *Viator* 5 (1994): 211–34; and Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990).

2. J. Figuet, “La Bible de Bernard: Données et ouvertures,” in *Bernard de Clairvaux: Histoire, mentalités, spiritualité. Colloque de Lyon-Cîteaux-Dijon*, Sources Chrétiennes 380 (Paris, 1992).