

“Das schöne Confitemini”: Engaging with Erich Zenger’s reading of Psalm 118 from a Jewish and Christian Reception History Perspective

Erich Zenger’s 2002 article on Ps 118 begins with noting how this has always been a popular psalm in Christian piety, partly because of the use of v. 1 (“O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!”) as a Grace at mealtimes.¹ He records how this was Martin Luther’s favourite psalm, as evidenced in a letter written in July 1530 to Abbot French Pistorius, calling Ps 118 “Das schöne Confitemini”: the psalm helped him when faced with opposition from secular powers, and reminded him that all powers change and fade, but Christ remains the same. So Luther writes:

So habe ich mich an *meinem* Reichtum gehalten, der in meinen Augen mein Schatz ist, and meinen lieben Psalm mir vorgenommen, das schöne Confitemini ... Denn es ist mein Psalm, den ich liebhab.²

Quite how Luther’s reading emerges directly from the psalm is an issue we shall deal with later; but at this stage it is important to note that, as Erich Zenger states near the end of this article, what was “schön” for Luther had often been seen as “unschön” for Jews, particularly those who were the recipients of some of Luther’s anti-semitic writings.³ Zenger argues that the multi-faceted nature of this psalm should inspire a greater spirit of generosity, whereby Jews and Christians together can enter through the gate of the Lord (v. 19–20) and inhabit the “house of righteousness” in their different ways.⁴ Zenger concludes:

Die christliche Kirche ist ja nicht ein Neubau, der – wie Christen lange Zeit bibelwidrig meinten – auf den Ruinen des Judentums erbaut ist. Von Eph 2,19–22 her legt sich eher die Metapher nahe, daß die Kirche ein Anbau an das Judentum ist – wobei wichtig ist, daß gerade im Horizont von Ps 118 weder Judentum noch Christentum ein ‚fertiges‘ Haus sind. [...] Durch

¹ Zenger, *Confitemini* (2002), 112. Bible references are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

² Zenger, *Confitemini* (2002), 112, citing *Luther, Confitemini* (1979), 67–68.

³ Ironically, Luther’s exegesis of v. 27 allegorizes the “branches” to create a vitriolic attack on the Jewish festival of Sukkoth: see *Hals, Psalm 118* (1993), 282.

⁴ Zenger, *Confitemini* (2002), 126.

[Christus] wird der ganze Bau zusammengehalten und wächst zu einem heiligen Tempel des Herrn.⁵

I owe a huge debt to Erich Zenger's generous encouragement of my own studies of the psalms, so it seemed appropriate in this publication in honour of his life and work that I engage a little further with some of his comments at the end of this paper on Ps 118. There is here some "unfinished work". Erich was due to be the plenary speaker at a conference I hosted with Professor John Barton, at Worcester College, Oxford, in July 2010: his untimely death some three months earlier meant that I never heard him address the key concern of the conference, whose title was *Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms. Conflict and Convergence*. Hence my response to his earlier 2002 paper on Ps 118 as "Das schöne Confitemini" is an imaginative attempt to create a "dialogue" beyond the grave, as it were.

Erich Zenger's commentary on this psalm in English is in the *Hermeneia* series, a work which he co-wrote with Frank-Lothar Hossfeld (who graciously stepped in to be the replacement plenary conference speaker in 2010).⁶ Zenger's introduction to Ps 118 raises two most pertinent issues which I intend to take up as part of this dialogue. The first observation is the meaning in v. 22 of the words *לְאֵפֶיטוֹן שֶׁפִּינָה* which qualify the *אֶבֶן*, or the "stone" which the builders rejected. These two words are translated in the NRSV as "cornerstone", but in Zenger's commentary they are intriguingly translated as "keystone".⁷ An appropriate reading of this term is critical in Jewish and Christian relations, as we shall see by the end of this paper. Secondly, in his discussion of the reception of this psalm in the New Testament and in Matt 21–23 in particular, Zenger notes how Ps 118 is read both as an assurance of the promises of salvation first given to Israel and then to the Church, and also as an eschatological hope for both Christians and Jews, celebrated in their liturgical use of verses from this psalm both at Passover and Easter.⁸ Again, this irenic reading – one which Zenger also raised at the end of his article entitled "Das schöne Confitemini" – is vital for Jewish and Christian relations as they each use a potentially contentious psalm.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hossfeld/Zenger, *Psalms* (2011). The conference paper was published as Hossfeld/Steiner, *Problems* (2013).

⁷ Hossfeld/Zenger, *Psalms* (2011), 229, 230, 241–242.⁸ Ibid., 245–246. See also Zenger, *Gesegnet* (2007).

⁸ Ibid., 245–246. See also Zenger, *Gesegnet* (2007).

More generally, Zenger notes that the movement of the psalm “from outside to inside” raises questions as to whether this was once a private psalm (such as Luther read it) or whether it was a psalm performed publicly, in liturgy, with political dimensions.⁹ Zenger opines that the final date of Ps 118 must be quite late, perhaps around the fourth century BCE. This is partly on account of its very particular intertextual links with Ex 15: for example, v. 14 and 21 cite part of Ex 15:2, and v. 15–16 cite part of Ex 15:11–13; furthermore, the word YAH is used in each text, occurring five times in Ps 118 and once in Ex 15:2. Its late date is also on account of the similar links with Is 12:2, which in turn relates to Ex 12:2. This means Ps 118 has absorbed exodus/exilic/post-exilic traditions, as well as earlier traditions from the Davidic monarchy.¹⁰ Zenger argues that those responsible for its compilation, if not its earliest composition, were probably Temple Singers; they would have known of these texts, and they would have brought together these various exodus, royal, exilic and post-exilic traditions to create a “collective song of thanksgiving as we now have it, with its universal and future-orientated horizon”.¹¹ According to Zenger, these Temple singers were also responsible for including this psalm at the close of the festal cantata (later known as the “Hallel”) comprising Ps 113–118, and they also brought this collection into the larger context of Ps 107, 108–110, 111–112.¹²

There are many ways in which my dialogue with Erich might be pursued. I could reflect further on the process of the shaping of Ps 118 within Ps 113–118, and beyond this, within Ps 107–118, but this would take me too far beyond the brief of Ps 118 *per se*. I might instead follow up the psalm’s use of both exodus and royal traditions, whereby the exodus event becomes a paradigm of encouragement and hope not only for the exilic but also for the post-exilic community, whereby the Mosaic traditions become absorbed into the Davidic traditions of

⁹ Hossfeld/Zenger, *Psalms* (2011), 232. If this is genuine royal psalm, its date would have to be pre-exilic, but if it is a communal psalm, there are many possibilities, mostly post-exilic: according to Zenger, dates as various as 536, 520, 515, 444, 164 and 161 BCE would be possible. The phrase “from outside to inside” is found *ibid.*, 234.

¹⁰ Hossfeld/Zenger, *Psalms* (2011), 234–236.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹² *Ibid.* This is also my view, which I first proposed publicly at the conference on the composition of the Book of Psalms held at Leuven in August 2008, under Erich Zenger’s Presidency of the Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense; see Gillingham, *Levitical* (2010).

Jerusalem Temple liturgy.¹³ I might also develop the proposal that this was the work of the Temple singers. Again, however, this discussion would detract from my brief in responding to Erich's 2002 paper on Ps 118. So, instead of focussing on the possible role of the Temple singers at the early stage of this psalm's reception into the Psalter, I intend to focus on its later reception after the fourth century BCE, and so deal with the two issues noted earlier, which together concern the use of Ps 118 by Jewish and Christian communities of faith. I shall assess both the problems and possibilities in Erich's view expressed at the end of that 2002 article, that this was a psalm where Jews and Christians together can inhabit the "house of righteousness" in their different ways. To this end I intend to apply some of the research I have been doing for a reception history commentary on the entire Psalter, of which Ps 118 is a part.¹⁴

Like Zenger, I understand this to be a *multi-faceted* psalm, drawing together both exodus and royal traditions to create a future-looking work which could be used at several stages in Jewish and Christian history. The figure who seems to be the key "speaker" in the psalm is thus multi-faceted as well, creating the potential for both Jews and Christians to read the psalm in various ways, both personally and corporately. Even a brief overview of Jewish and Christian reception of Ps 118 illustrates this so clearly. As I shall demonstrate, in later Jewish tradition, the figure is seen to be Abraham, or Moses, or David, or the community of Israel, past present and future; whilst in Christian interpretation, the figure is almost consistently Christ or sometimes (as Luther presumes) the individual believer, and also sometimes the Church. The psalmist's enemies have variously been seen as oppressors of Judaism, whether Greek, Roman or, later, Christian; by contrast, through a Christian lens, they have been the Jews (when the figure in the Psalm was read as Jesus Christ in his earthly life), or political opponents of the "true Church". This is undoubtedly a psalm with manifold meanings.

Before filling this out in more detail, I now turn to the text of the psalm itself, recognising, along with Zenger, that it is a composite work, apparently brought together for liturgical

¹³ A recent work in English on Ps 118, thus citing many other scholars, is *Vaillancourt, Saviour* (2019), 130–176, 180–182. His view that the psalm evinces a multi-faceted (royal and Mosaic) reading as well as having an eschatological emphasis is close to that held by Zenger.

¹⁴ Volume One, a reception history survey of the entire Psalter, was first published in 2008. Volume Two, on the reception history of Psalms 1–72, was published in 2018, and Volume Three (on Psalms 73–150) is due out in 2021. See *Gillingham, Psalms* (2008; 2018).

purposes, incorporating earlier material about a figure who was first rejected from and later restored to the community of faith.

The psalm starts with a *call of praise* to all Israel, to the priests, and to all peoples to give thanks to the Lord, using the refrain “His steadfast love endures forever” (v. 1–4). It is then possible to read the following narrative throughout the rest of the psalm: v. 5–18 appear to be a *thanksgiving song of deliverance*, either of the king or some religious leader. These speak of how the individual was nearly overcome by enemies but then was granted victory by God, whose “right hand”, on account of it, has been highly exalted (v. 15–16). Various repetitions are used for dramatic effect throughout (v. 6.7; v. 8.9; v. 10.11.12). The psalm then takes up a *liturgy of entrance to the Temple* (v. 19–20), when the figure requests to be allowed passage through the Temple gates (v. 19) and is given an answer from within that only the righteous might enter in (v. 20). Returning to the theme in v. 5–18, another *thanksgiving song and prayer* (v. 21–25) recalls the rejection of the figure by his people (v. 21–23) and then recites a thanksgiving from the congregation at his having been reconciled with them, thus vindicating his righteousness to enter the gates (v. 23–25). Another *liturgy of entrance* (v. 26–27) allows the figure to be admitted to the company of worshippers, who bless him; his own *thanksgiving* (v. 28) is followed by the same *call to praise*, with a final refrain, the same as the one which introduced the psalm (v. 29).

I shall now examine, firstly, the Jewish reception of this psalm, and, in the light of this, turn to its Christian reception. The first observation is the reception of this psalm into Greek. I emphasise only one point, as it will be relevant later. This is the reference to the stone becoming the ‘head of the corner’ (Hebrew, פֶּנֶן שֶׁאֵין לוֹ זָוִיָּה) in v. 22, which is translated into Greek as κεφαλὴν γωνίας. This would suggest a keystone or coping stone—one used at the end of building process—rather than a foundation stone, used at the beginning. Indeed, the fact that it was originally a stone *rejected* by the builders which was *later* used as a “κεφαλὴν γωνίας” suggests it was used at the end of the building process. This was of course a Greek version for the *Jewish* community; but it was also the translation used by the Christian community, and a good deal was made of these two words in later reception. I shall make more of this reading near the end of this paper.

When we look at the early Jewish commentary tradition on this psalm, one surprising feature emerges: David is central in the interpretation, but little is said at all about the role of Moses. Indeed, more is said about Abraham.

The importance of Ps 118 in Jewish tradition begins with Qumran, where it appears in six scrolls. Twice (in 11QPs^a and 4QPs^e) it is placed after Ps 116 and before Ps 104, thus breaking its connection as ending the Hallel and linking it with the theme of creation in Ps 104 (rather than the Torah as in Ps 119). One interesting reference is in 4QPsalmsPeshar^b, or 4Q173, where the “Teacher of Righteousness” is described using language from Ps 118: references include a “broad place” (v. 5); “gate” (v. 20); and “light”, “festal branches” (v. 27), thus indicating that already the psalm is being applied to particular figures of faith.

The appropriation of the psalm to another figure of faith is found in the *Targum*, where v. 21–28 become an antiphonal commentary on how the youthful David was rejected by the builders (i.e. the religious leaders) to be the rightful king, taken from 1 Sam 16:1–13. So in v. 23a the builders speak; in 23b the sons of Jesse reply; in 24a the builders speak again; in 24b the sons of Jesse reply again; in 25a the builders respond; in 25b Jesse and his wife respond; in 26a the builders answer; in 26b David replies; in 27a the families of Judah join in; in 27b Samuel the prophet speaks; in verse 28 it is David, and verse 29 concludes with Samuel.¹⁵ This corresponds with the distinct narrative and liturgical character of this psalm. In *b.Pesahim* 119a we find a similar antiphonal narrative but with different assignments: David speaks in v. 21, Jesse in v. 22, David’s brothers in v. 23, Samuel in verse 24, David’s brothers then David in v. 25, Jesse then Samuel in v. 26, all those assembled then Samuel in v. 27, and David and the tribe of Judah in v. 28. In each case the central feature is the rejected stone—the Davidic king—which then becomes the head of the corner.

Midrash Tehillim, concerned to create associations between the Psalter and the Torah, argues that the “stone” imagery in v. 22 is not about David but Abraham; he is that “foundation stone” (לְרֵאשִׁית פְּנֵה) whose righteousness will endure forever (citing Ps 112:9, but also alluding to the refrain about God’s steadfast love enduring forever in 118:1–4 and 29).¹⁶

¹⁵ *Stec*, *Targum* (2004), 209–210.

¹⁶ *Braude*, *Midrash* (1959), 238.

Some Jewish commentators prefer to read Ps 118 as an early liturgy spoken by Israel as a whole, who, having escaped from their exile, can say as in v. 17: “I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord ...”. Rashi, writing on this verse, paraphrases it as “I the congregation of Israel shall not die a permanent death like the rest of the nations, but I shall live ...”.¹⁷ Given the Christian emphasis on resurrection, with its rhetoric that unbelieving Jews would suffer permanent death, this is Rashi’s affirmation of the superiority of Judaism. Although Rashi argues that perhaps some of the “righteous” who pass through the gate in v. 20 could be righteous Gentiles, the “rejected stone” in v. 22 is undoubtedly Israel, despised by her enemies, but restored by God.¹⁸ It is important to note that in all these interpretations the motif of the “rejected stone” is central.¹⁹

Ps 118 is used a good deal in Jewish liturgy, in part due to its extended commentary tradition. Liturgical elements are embedded into its complex composition: its refrains at the beginning, phrases in the following song of deliverance (e.g. v. 10, 14, 15–16, 17), verses in the following ritual enactment (v. 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27) and in the call to praise at the end (v. 29). Many of these elements are used in later Jewish liturgy. It is the last of the Passover psalms, and v. 26–27 are used at Booths as well (see *Mishnah Sukkah* 3.9 and 4.5). Temple liturgy is a key influence in this psalm, so when this ended after the Temple’s destruction in 70 CE and the psalm was used instead in the synagogue, it became an important resource for lamenting on the loss of the Temple and hoping for its restoration.²⁰

Partly because of its liturgical use, the psalm has also been prominent in Jewish music. Here, compositions tend to use the verses from the very end of the psalm. Salamone Rossi’s *Baruch Habah Beshem Adonai*, published in about 1623, is a motet based upon v. 26–29 in a *cappella* style. It imitates an Italian Madrigal and was composed to suggest what the Levitical singers

¹⁷ Gruber, *Rashi’s Commentary* (2004), 672–674.

¹⁸ Cohen, *Psalms* (1992), 289, 392.

¹⁹ Feuer, *Tehillim* (2004), 1411.

²⁰ Schonfield, *Psalms 113–118* (2017), 145–157.

might have performed at Passover for the Hallel. The leader declaims a verse and the congregation sings back, using both polyphony and homophony.²¹

A more secular example is *Hava Nagila* (“*Let us Rejoice*”), based upon v. 22. This is a folk song and instrumental piece from Ukraine brought to Jerusalem and published in 1914 by the musicologist Abraham Zevi Idelsohn (1882–1932). This interprets the verse in a more universal way: it is about human solidarity, with no reference to God. It became the song accompanying the Balkan circle dance known as the “Hora Dance”, and used in, for example, *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), *The Jazz Singer* (1980) and the movie documentary *Hava Nagila: The Movie* (2012).²²

One unusual jazz version which uses v. 19–23 is by the American jazz pianist and composer David Brubeck (1920–2012), whose *The Gates of Justice* (1969) was composed for the Union of American Hebrew Congregation, Florida. Intended to enable reconciliation between blacks and Jews, this was a mixture of psalms, speeches by Martin Luther King, negro spirituals, and Jewish Hallel songs. V. 19–23 are used in Part II, along with Is 62:10 and 57:4, using a Jewish cantor and spiritual blues singers. The gates here lead to the market place, the bus station, the subway exit, and the shopping mall, deliberately imitating the same “secular” audience the biblical prophets would have addressed.²³

The psalm’s reception in Jewish art is not very prolific. An illustration of the invitation to enter God’s gates with thanksgiving is found in the *Oppenheimer Siddur* (Bodleian Ms. Opp. 776, fol. 79b). The colourful and lively illustration is of various instrumentalists praising God, and the word “hosanna” is written in Hebrew under it.²⁴ This again testifies to the importance of the psalm in Jewish liturgy. A notable interpretation is by the twentieth century Jewish artist Benn, who lived in Paris after the Second World War, and created two images of this psalm.²⁵ One, dated 1973, is of v. 5 (“Dans ma détresse j’ai appelé Dieu, / il m’a répondu, il m’a mis au

²¹ *Stern*, Music (2013), 41–47; also <https://www.bbc.co.uk/music/tracks/n3pr5d>.

²² *Dowling Long/Sawyer*, Music (2015), 98.

²³ *Stern*, Music (2013), 177–185.

²⁴ This is the only time this phrase comes in this form in the psalms, although Ps 106:47 is close to it, so it is likely to pertain to Ps 118, given the Siddur’s associations with the Passover and its use of the Hallel.

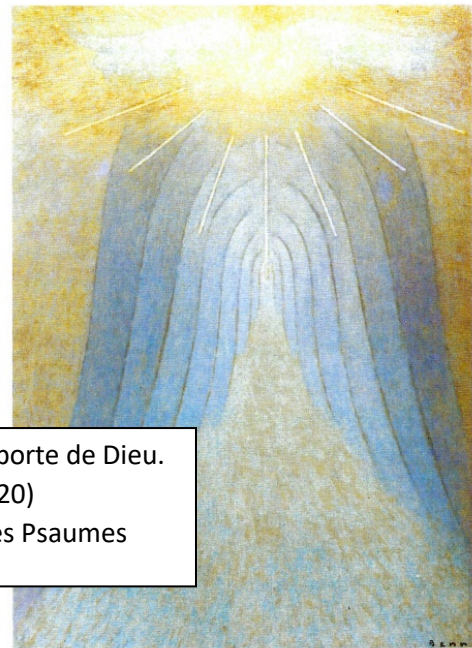
²⁵ *Benn*, *Psaumes* (2005), no page numbers.

large”) which is of two figures, one in a deep crevasse reaching upwards to the light, and the other dancing in a broad green field, with a hovering white winged angelic figure above him. The other, dated 1962, is of v. 20 (“Voici la porte de Dieu”), which is of another vast white-winged angel, creating beams of light over a door which seems to be set at the end of several blue overlapping tunnels. The images, seen below, reveal the influence of Benn’s experience of being captured by the Nazis and interned into a concentration camp in France between 1941 and 1942: it was during this time he started to draw sketches of psalms on scraps of paper.



1973

Dans ma détresse j’ai appelé Dieu,
il m’a répondu, il m’a mis au large.
(Ps 118:5) *Benn, Les Psaumes*



1962

Voici la porte de Dieu.
(Ps 118:20)
Benn, Les Psaumes

Hence whereas in the commentary tradition there are examples of the psalm relating to an individual figure (though rarely the Messiah, and mainly the figures of Abraham and David), in the more “performative” traditions of liturgy, music and art there is a tendency to see the speaker as the whole people of Israel, or at least as individuals within the persecuted community. Jewish reception of this psalm inspired confidence in the past and hope for the future.

Christian reception has, to its shame, either ignored or questioned the importance of this psalm in Jewish imagination. The journey starts with the interpretation given to this psalm in the New Testament. The allusions to a processional entry into Jerusalem, perhaps once a royal figure of the house of David, afforded the New Testament writers new vistas of interpretation: much of it focused around Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, cited in all four Gospels. Thus we see another story line: in different ways, the Gospel writers view Jesus as the young son of Jesse and the "unrecognized king", whilst the opposing Jewish leaders become the builders rejecting the keystone, and the crowd becomes the receptive congregation at the end of the psalm. All four Gospels cite v. 26 ("Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord ...") and all but Luke cite the "Hosanna" ("Save!") in v. 25. V. 6, but especially v. 18, 19–20, 22–23, 25–26 (the subject matter of various recitations in *Targum* and the *Talmud*), are cited some sixteen times overall in the New Testament and very frequently by the early church fathers. These are now used to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah.²⁶

Each Gospel writer deals with Ps 118 in subtly different ways. Ps 118:22–23 (the "stone saying") has a clear significance in the Gospel of Mark. It comes after a confrontation with the religious leaders about Jesus' authority (Mark 11:27–12:12), and after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1–11, when Ps 118:25–26 is sung by the crowds), and after his cleansing the Temple (Mark 11:15–26), and after also the parable of the vineyard when the heir is killed (Mark 12:1–9). All these stories point towards the eventual rejection of Jesus few days later. Ps 118:22–23 is cited at Mark 12:10–11: Jesus, even now rejected by the religious leaders, will become the keystone (κεφαλὴν γωνίας) in the new people-Temple (see Mark 14:58).²⁷

Like Mark, Matthew uses Ps 118:25–26 (starting with הוֹשַׁעִי הוֹשַׁעִי, which reads in the Greek as Ὡσαννά or "Hosanna") as a hymn of praise sung by the crowds when Jesus enters Jerusalem (Matt 21:9), although Matthew adds 'Hosanna to the son of David' (Ὡσαννά τῷ υἱῷ Δαυίδ). Matthew's account then follows the same Temple disputes with the authorities which are found in Mark, and Matt 21:12–42 ends with the same stone saying from Ps 118:22–23.²⁸ Matt 23:39 then cites, a second time, Ps 118:26 ("Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord").

²⁶ McLean, *Allusions* (1992), 78–79.

²⁷ Watts, *Psalms* (2004), 30–35.

²⁸ For a most reasonable explanation of this difficult account, which might be read as implying that the stone will crush those Jews who oppose Jesus, see Hossfeld/Zenger, *Psalms* (2011), 245–246.

This is in the context of a lament for Jerusalem, “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” (Matt 23:37–38). The inference is similar, albeit expanded, to that in Mark: Jesus will become the keystone in a new city not made with hands (see also Matt 24:1–2).²⁹

Luke follows a similar narrative, though the “Blessed” saying in Ps 118:26 is recontextualised. It is found in Luke 13:35, and is spoken as part of the journey made by Jesus *before* he reaches Jerusalem: it is therefore used to speak of Jesus’ destiny to die there. This earlier use makes the reference to Ps 118:25–26, upon Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, in Luke 19:29–30, all the more poignant, where here Jesus is explicitly hailed as *a king*: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord ...”.³⁰ The use of the stone saying in Ps 118:22, after the parable of the vineyard, is similar to that in Mark and Matthew, except in Luke only *the son* is killed (Luke 20:9–16) and Luke cites only 118:22 (Luke 20:17), in this context also alluding to Jesus’ future vindication after his rejection. Ps 118 is important to Luke: v. 22 is also found in v. 11 of Peter’s speech in Acts 4:1–31, reiterating the theme of the vindication of Jesus through his resurrection.

John 12:13, also narrating Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, similarly uses the “Blessed” saying in Ps 118:26. The reference to the use of palm branches by the crowd may well be to evoke the Feast of *Sukkoth* or Tabernacles with which this psalm was also associated (see Ps 118:27). Here, Jesus is hailed as “King of Israel” and Zech 9:9 is also quoted (which is also used in Matthew’s account). John alone emphasises that the disciples did not understand the meaning of this event until after the resurrection (John 12:16).³¹

Acts 4:1–22, Peter’s speech before the Sanhedrin, cites Ps 118:22, using it as a prophecy about Christ “the rejected stone”.³² Hebrews uses Ps 118 too, although only v. 6 (“With the Lord on my side I do not fear ...”) in Heb 13:6, where “the Lord” is clearly now a reference to Christ himself. A detailed use of the “stone saying” in Ps 118:22 is found in 1 Pet 2:4–10, where the

²⁹ *Menken*, *Psalms* (2004), 70–75. See also *Giesler*, *Christ* (1974), 101–154, who argues that the parable of the vineyard in Matt 20:1–16 is an important preparation for the use of Ps 118:22 (“the rejected stone”) in Matthew’s Psalm Sunday narrative.

³⁰ *Wagner*, *Psalm 118* (1997), 163, 175–176. See also *Doble*, *Psalms* (2004), 84–86, 97–100, and *Sanders*, *Fabric* (1993).

³¹ For a different development of the use of Psalm 118 in John’s Gospel, see *Brunson*, *Psalm 118* (2003).

³² *Giesler*, *Christ* (1974), 158–159.

motif of “the stone” is developed in quite a complex way. Christ is the living stone (1 Pet 2:4); the church is called to be living stones too (1 Pet 4:5); Is 28:16 is then cited (1 Pet 2:6) and is combined in 1 Pet 2:7 with Ps 118:22, and in 1 Pet 2:8 with Is 8:4. This creates a full *catena* of stone sayings. Eph 2:20–21, cited earlier by Zenger, similarly alludes to Ps 118:22–23. Overall this shows just how significant Ps 118 had become in the early church: along with Ps 2, 22 and 110, it was a key psalm which pointed to Jesus as the Messiah.

In the church fathers the “stone sayings” are also prominent, but interestingly these are now combined with Ps 118:20 (“This is the gate of the Lord ...”). In this context the “stone saying” is harsher than in the New Testament, being often used along with Is 8:14–15 as an argument that God had rejected Israel and vindicated Christ: examples include Acts of Peter 24; Barn. 6:4; Justin *Dial.* 126:1. It is a strident theme in John Chrysostom’s commentary on this psalm, which argues primarily for the place of the Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation.³³ Origen, by contrast, seeing Christ as the Logos, also sees him as the foundation stone before all time, as well as the crowning stone which brings the whole edifice together.³⁴ Augustine takes this further: he cites Eph 2:15–16, and, seeing Christ as the “cornerstone” where two walls interconnect, applies this motif to “circumcision, to wit, and uncircumcision”.³⁵ The same view is taken by Eusebius of Caesarea, who instead uses 1 Cor 10:4 to show how Christ “as cornerstone” brings the walls of Jews and Gentiles together.³⁶ Linking the motif of the stone with that of the gate, Ephrem the Syrian’s allegorical approach is to read the cornerstone as the stone which covered the tomb, which then became the gate of life through which the righteous Gentiles could enter.³⁷

The interest in the “gates” (Ps 118:19–20) is found as early as Clement of Rome, who sees that Christ is the one who opens the gate, through which only the blessed can enter.³⁸ Cassiodorus develops this further: this is the gate of justice, and it is not only about Jerusalem, but about our inheritance for which the prophets and apostles had received keys. It is also the gate of

³³ Hill, St John Chrysostom (1998), 124–125.

³⁴ Cited in Giesler, Christ (1974), 270.

³⁵ Uyl, St Augustine (2017), 574; also *Sermon* 4:18 in *WSA* 31:195 cited in *Wesselschmidt*, Psalms 51–150 (2007), 308.

³⁶ Eusebius in *Proof of the Gospel* 1:7 in *POG* 1:45–46, cited in *Wesselschmidt*, Psalms 51–150 (2007), 309.

³⁷ Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron* 21:21. cited in *Wesselschmidt*, Psalms 51–150 (2007), 307–308.

³⁸ 1 Clement 48 in *AF* 83, cited in *Wesselschmidt*, Psalms 51–150 (2007), 306. See also <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-roberts.html>.

teaching and nourishment for the Catholic Church, and is indeed “wonderful in the eyes” of all those who, like Peter, have seen and confessed Christ as the Son of the Living God.³⁹

By the Middle Ages, the psalm had its own Christian narrative. It was associated not only with the sufferings of Christ (often using v. 10–13) but also as a psalm of praise because of all that Christ had achieved through his resurrection (here using v. 15–19) in opening up the gate for the righteous (v. 20), uniting the church (v. 22–23), announcing the days of the New Testament (v. 24) and encouraging the festivals of the church (v. 26–27).⁴⁰

This highlights just how different John Calvin’s approach to this psalm is. His typical approach to the psalms is to view the figure of David at the heart of a psalm, and thus here it is David who is seen as an example of true piety (and thus challenging the apparent lack of piety in the Catholic Church). Calvin equates “the builders” in Ps 118:22 with Roman Catholic leaders who had led the people astray: David is thus an exemplar of *Protestant piety*, promoting true worship of God. Hence, rather than seeing the “enemies” as the Jews, they are those Roman Catholics who deal cruelly and “surround” the (Protestant) people of God (Ps 118:10–12). As for the Jews: Calvin reads the “Hosanna” and “Blessed” sayings in Ps 118:25–26 as promoting the piety of the Jews, for they are the true exemplars of faith and trust whose words inspire us today.⁴¹ This is a very different commentary with respect to Jewish and Christian relations.

We have already noted Martin Luther’s love of this psalm, and how he called it his own: “When emperors and kings, the wise and the learned, and even saints could not aid me, the Psalm proved a friend and helped me out of many troubles ...”.⁴² A well-attested tradition recounts that Luther wrote the words and the plainsong notes of Ps 118:17 (“I shall not die but live, and recount the works of the Lord”) on the walls of his living quarters in Coburg Castle. It was during the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 that he wrote an impassioned commentary on Ps 118, again calling it “the beautiful *Confitemini*”. Surrounded by enemies, both in the Church and outside it (i.e. Catholics and politicians as in v. 10–12), but saved and protected by entering

³⁹ *Walsh*, Cassiodorus (1991), 169–171.

⁴⁰ *Pak*, Calvin (2010), 16, referring to the Gloss, Lyra, Denis and Lefèvre.

⁴¹ *Pak*, Calvin (2010), 90–93.

⁴² Taken from *WA* 31:66, cited in *Pak*, Calvin (2010) 157.

through the gates of the church into the presence of Christ (v. 20), and then encountering Christ as the Cornerstone and Head of the Holy Church (v. 22–23), Luther found himself able to see the dawn of a new day as he cried “Hosanna!: Lord, Save Us!” (v. 24–25).⁴³ For Luther, the storyline of this psalm shows how all tyrants opposed to Christ will be defeated. His commentary is a compelling example of the effects of the narrative power of this psalm, as Luther reads it from the time of David to the time of Christ into his own day.⁴⁴

Verses from Psalm 118 were used in Christian liturgy from the time of the early church fathers. Chrysostom’s commentary refers to singing v. 6 (“With the Lord on my side I do not fear ...”) as a refrain, encouraging his readers to manifest it not only in song but in their deeds.⁴⁵ Two other antiphons from v. 25 (“O Domine salvum fac o Domine prosperare”) and v. 26 (“Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini”) were used at Mass from at least the sixth century, and the psalm as a whole is prescribed from about the same time, in the Benedictine Rule, for Lauds on Sunday. V. 17 (“I shall not die, but live”), and the later reference to the righteous passing through the gates (of death to life) meant that as early as the eighth century it was used in funeral processions from the church to the grave.⁴⁶

Its later liturgical use, from the sixteenth century onwards, is evidenced in the composition of a vast number of antiphons usually based on one to three verses. V. 17 (“I shall not die, but live, and recount the deeds of the Lord”) was often composed not for funerals but for the offertory: Luther’s version of this verse is one such example. Another example is William Byrd’s *Haec Dies* (1589), a motet for six voices, which uses v. 24 (“This is the day that he Lord has made”) in honour of the Jesuit priest Edmond Campion who sang it defiantly in 1581 when sentenced to death.⁴⁷ V. 26 (“Benedictus ...”) was an antiphon arranged by Johann Sebastian Bach; it was originally intended for Christmas Day in 1724, for a tenor voice and wind *obbligato*, but was later incorporated into his *Mass in B Minor*. George Wither’s *Hymns and Songs of the Church* (1623) included melodies ascribed to Orlando Gibbons: Ps 118:24

⁴³ See *WA* 31, cited in *Fischer*, *Ecclesiastes* (1983), 277–283.

⁴⁴ *Hals*, *Psalm 118* (1983), 277–283.

⁴⁵ *Hill*, *St John Chrysostom* (1998), 118.

⁴⁶ *Pickett*, *Songs* (2002), 10.

⁴⁷ *Dowling Long/Sawyer*, *Music* (2015), 96.

(“This is the day”) is used here as an Easter antiphon.⁴⁸ George Frederick Handel arranged the same verse for the wedding of the Princess Royal. Musical arrangements clearly bear witness to the multivalent readings of this psalm.

Interestingly, neither the controversial “gate” v. 20 nor the “stone” v. 22–23 received much attention in earlier Christian music. A number of contemporary anthems, however, use these verses: “God is my Strength and Song” is based upon v. 14–17, 22–24, whilst “Open to me the Gates of Righteousness”, is based upon v. 19–22.⁴⁹ The hymn *Christ is our Cornerstone*, from an unknown author in the sixth or seventh centuries, and arranged by Samuel Sebastian Wesley in 1839, adapts v. 22–23. Isaac Watts’ *Lo! What a glorious corner-stone/The Jewish builders* did refuse is an earlier version on the same theme, with Watts’ somewhat predictable supersessionist theme.⁵⁰

Conversely, artistic representations of the psalm focus more on the “gate” and “stone” motifs. Byzantine Psalters, for whom the v. 22–23 spoke of God’s rejection of the Jews during the iconoclastic controversies, used this image frequently. The *Theodore Psalter* (fol. 157v) and also the *Barberini Psalter* (fol. 202r) both illustrate Christ riding an ass through the gates of Jerusalem with angry Jewish leaders looking on whilst palm fronds are raised in jubilation. The image here is very like that for Ps 8.⁵¹ A slightly different interpretation is found in the twelfth century *St Albans Psalter*, where an image for “This is the gate of the Lord” is found within the letter ‘C’ (for Confitemini, using the first letter of v. 1): here an angel opens the gates with one hand, and, with the other hand, holds a book inscribed with v. 20 to the psalmist.⁵²

Hence this account of the reception history of this psalm illustrates just how divergent both Jewish and Christian reception could be. Occasionally there is some anti-Christian or anti-Jewish polemic, the former exemplified in Rashi’s commentary, the later, in the marginal

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁹ *Laster*, Catalogue (2002), 27–28. Hymns and choruses based upon v. 22–23 are to be found at <http://www.lutheran-hymnal.com/lyrics/lw290.htm> and https://hymnary.org/text/christ_is_our_cornerstone.

⁵⁰ See <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/watts/psalmshymns.Ps.263.html>.

⁵¹ See http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_19352_f157v#; see *Gillingham*, *Psalms* (2018), 78–79 (on Ps 8:2).

⁵² See <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/commentary/page309.shtml>.

images in Byzantine Psalters. In each tradition, the early commentaries – whether from the *Midrash Tehillim* or the Talmud, or from the Gospels, epistles, or early church fathers – became seminal for later interpretation: Jewish reception has looked at the psalm through the lens of Abraham, David, or from the collective Jewish experience of suffering and exile; Christian reception has viewed the psalm through the lens of Christ, who is both the one spoken about and the one to be addressed as ‘Lord’ in the psalm. Only Calvin’s commentary, of these examples, represents a more irenic approach in seeing David as the exemplar of obedient faith.

So is there any way in which there might be the sort of reconciliation Erich Zenger spoke about at the end of his article on “Das schöne Confitemini”? Is there any way in which its overall message, sung at the beginning and ending of the psalm, that God’s steadfast love endures for ever, might be heard? And that, as Erich suggested, those who enter through the “gates of righteousness” might be both Christians and Jews?

In my view, the “stone saying” is fundamental in bringing both faith traditions together, in part because of its ambiguity, in part because of the way of speaks of restoration after rejection. This word, as we have seen in the translation of v. 22 from the Hebrew (לְרִאשִׁית שֹׁהַן) into Greek (κεφαλὴν γωνίας) could mean *either* a foundation stone at the base corner of two walls, *or* a keystone/capstone placed at the top of a building. As a *foundation* stone, this refers clearly to its origins in Jewish history, whether speaking of Abraham, or Moses, or David, or the early election of the people as a whole.⁵³ This idea is perhaps illustrated best by Is 28:16, where God promises to his people: הִנְנִי יֹסֵד בְּצִיּוֹן אֶבֶן אֲבֵן אֲבֵן בָּרָחָה פְּנֵי יְקִרְתָּ מוֹדָד מוֹדָד (literally, “Behold, I will lay in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, for the foundation which I will surely found”).⁵⁴ As Zenger has argued, the Jewish faith is the foundational stone of antiquity upon which all Christian interpretation is based.

A keystone or capstone suggests a stone which is set at the end of the building process, not at the beginning of it. This is what we argued the Greek translation κεφαλὴν γωνίας implies.

⁵³ It could of course simply mean the foundation stone of the second Temple, as alluded to in Zech 3:7–9, Hagg 2:3–5, Neh 6:15–17 and Esd 3:3–13. See *Giesler*, Christ (1974), 32–33.

⁵⁴ Here the word תָּבַח is the construct form of תָּבַח found in Ps 118:22. The word תָּבַח occurs with a similar meaning in Jer 51:26 and Zech 4:7.

This is the “head” (κεφαλή) cornerstone, also evident in the Latin translation *hic factus est in caput anguli*.⁵⁵ For Jews reading the Greek translation, this would mean the *completion* of their faith in the coming of the Messiah, and for Christians, reading this in Greek from a New Testament context, it would mean the *fulfilment* of their faith in Christ who is the Messiah who has come and will come again. In both faith traditions this is about the future as well as about the past.

It is difficult to determine whether this cornerstone is one laid first or last. Nevertheless, what is clear in each proposed meaning is that the stone is set between two corners of the building, whether at the beginning or the end of the building process. This is the emphasis we find in Peter’s speech in Acts 4:11, found also in 1 Pet 2:7–9: this is the “cornerstone” which unites the two walls, Jewish and Gentile.⁵⁶ This is also the interpretation given by Origen, Augustine and Eusebius, who, for different reasons, argue that the cornerstone is the place which unites both Jewish and Christian “walls” in God’s overall plan of salvation. So we might conclude that the cornerstone in Ps 118 allows us to think of a building which includes both faiths, each built up as living stones, each waiting for future completion. I believe this is what Erich himself was implying when at the end of his own article on Ps 118 when he cited Eph 2:19–22, which in this context, as is the case with all the New Testament references to Ps 118:22, speaks specifically of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. We read in Eph 2 that this building is founded not only on the apostles but also on the prophets, and it is the whole ancient structure which is joined together and grows into a holy temple. Surely, as Erich himself proposed, a psalm which bears witness to God’s steadfast love, and to his ability to vindicate the rejected, should play a part in *uniting* both faith traditions rather than dividing them. If this ideal could be achieved, then Ps 118 would indeed be a “schöne Confitemini”.

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⁵⁵ The slightly different use of the word ἀκρογωνιαῖον, without the defining κεφαλὴν, in relation here to a *foundation* stone “in the extreme corner” in Is 28:16 is illuminating in this respect.

⁵⁶ Giesler, Christ (1974), 169.

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