

**‘The righteous shall inherit the Land, and live in it forever’ (Ps 37.29).
Towards a Theology of and Human and Divine Justice
through the Reception History of Psalm 37.**

1. Introduction: the Context of this Paper

The roots of this paper go back to a conference held at Worcester College, Oxford, in 2010, entitled ‘Conflict and Convergence: Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms’.¹ At that conference the summation paper was given by Frank-Lothar Hossfeld: its title was ‘Problems and Prospects in Psalter Studies’. There Hossfeld compared the Psalter to a house of many rooms, and this three-dimensional view allowed him to look at the theology of the Psalter in terms of *adjoining* psalms, *twin* psalms, psalms with similar *titles*, psalms connected by *formulae* such as הללויה and הודו, and psalms connected by *themes* such as ‘God is King’. This metaphor also allowed for the emphasis on the ספר תהלים as a unified scroll, comprising many psalms connected together in many different ways, all with their different histories of reception. The theology of the Psalter, the key theme in this publication, is about ‘diversity in unity’, and what follows with respect to the reception history of Psalm 37 is an exploration of the implications of this.

Another metaphor might be a musical one. Not only has this been used by Hossfeld himself, but it also occurs on the first page of *The Psalter as Witness. Theology, Poetry and Genre*, edited by Professors Tucker and Bellinger of Baylor University.² There they refer to Gunkel’s image of the Psalter as a Glockenspiel, whose individual notes make up one melody. But in terms of reception history, a more apt musical metaphor might be of an *orchestra*, whereby many psalms commentators, each with different methodological approaches and different cultural contexts, learn to tune in with their different instruments, the equivalent of string or wind, keyboard or brass, timpani or, simply, song. This creates a rich ensemble, and perhaps in the context of this publication we might imagine that the identity of our conductor is the spirit of Frank-Lothar, who has influenced and inspired so many of us today.

The proceedings of the last Bonn symposium (in 2012) were published in 2016 as *Trägerkreise in den Psalmen*. On that occasion my paper on the Levitical singers and the editing of the Psalter used a combination of historical and literary approaches.³ On this

¹ Edited proceedings published as S.E. GILLINGHAM, *Jewish and Christian*.

² W.D. TUCKER and W.H. BELLINGER, Jr., *Psalter*.

³ S.E. GILLINGHAM, *Levitical Singers*.

occasion I intend to use a different method, namely reception history, in order to illustrate the importance of a multi-cultural perspective on the theology of the Psalter. I may be biased, but in my view no other theological discipline engages as much with the diversity of theologies in the Psalter – indeed, within one individual psalm – as does reception history. Different cultural contexts – *after* the formation of the Psalter – bring about a myriad of different interpretations of the theology of the psalms, throwing new light on both individual psalms and the Psalter as a whole. Erhard Gerstenberger has made a seminal contribution to this debate in his *Theologies in the Old Testament*: partly due to his own multiculturalism from his times in Germany, America and Brazil, Gerstenberger is particularly sensitive to the multivalent nature of the task of assessing the ‘theologies’ within the Old Testament as a whole.⁴ If ‘theology’ is about our human responses to God, and no response is ever made in a cultural vacuum, there is bound to be much multivalency. Both geography and history play a part in this, and this is what reception history recognizes, because its purview of geography and history goes way beyond the ancient Near East, taking in eastern and western Christendom and Jewish diaspora communities as well.

2. Psalm 37 and a ‘Theology of the Poor’ in the Psalms

So the focus of this paper is a study of the reception history of Psalm 37. I chose this psalm because it fits well with an important theological concern in many of the psalms – its *Armentheologie*. In my view this psalm is distinctive in its view of poverty, because of its sometimes puzzling preoccupation with the themes of the ‘land’ and the ‘righteous’. The theme of the land is paramount: in Psalm 37 the word ארץ (sometimes translated ‘earth’, sometimes ‘land’) occurs six times, once in relation to ‘dwelling’ in it (verse 3 - using שכן) and five times in relation to ‘inheriting’ it (verses 9, 11, 22, 29 and 34, using ירש). The phrase ‘they shall inherit the land’ is used only in this psalm and nowhere else in the Psalter. Elsewhere, especially in the Deuteronomistic literature, it is used fairly frequently as a literal, material promise and is addressed to the entire people of Israel; but in this psalm it is unclear whether the promise is always material and it certainly no longer applies to the entire people, but only to a righteous few.⁵ The second theme, namely the fate of the righteous, is also paramount: there are more references to the ‘righteous’ here than in any other psalm, including 119.⁶ So Psalm 37 has its

⁴ E.S. GERSTENBERGER, *Theologien*, 320-21.

⁵ See E.R. RUIZ, *Das Land*, 26-27.

⁶ See verses 12, 16, 17, 21, 25, 28, 29, 30, 32, 39.

own distinctive ‘theology of the poor’ and a study of the history of its reception illuminates further its distinctiveness within the Psalter as a whole.

However, despite its peculiar theology, Psalm 37 also has many associations with the teaching on poverty in Psalms 35-41, that small collection at the end of Book One of the Psalter. Indeed there are many associations with the teaching on poverty in the Psalter as a whole. The interest in the ‘poor’ occurs in every single psalm in Psalms 35-41, as Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, Erich Zenger, and Johannes Bremer have frequently pointed out.⁷ Psalm 37 also fits with the interest in *Armentheologie* elsewhere in the Psalter, such as in that smaller collection, Psalms 135-137, and, to a lesser degree, Psalms 25-34. Finally, Psalm 37 also has several correspondences with the interest in the poor in many other individual psalms, where words such as עני, אביון, דל, and ענו cluster together. Psalms 9, 10, 12, 22, 49, 69, 76, 82, 86, 88, 109, 113, 140, 147, and 149 are good examples outside the aforesaid collections.⁸ So in this respect a study of the reception history Psalm 37 has ramifications for an understanding of the theology of poverty in these other psalms as well, although following this through is beyond the scope of this particular paper.⁹

What I hope to demonstrate is that the concept of a ‘theology of the poor’ is both recognizable and multifaceted when we examine the reception history of this particular psalm. Reception history is a journey through space and time, accruing many different theological interpretations along the way. Not only do different early translations (for example, from Hebrew into Greek, and later into Aramaic, and Greek into Latin) lead to a number of different readings of the text, but also the vast commentary tradition, both Jewish and Christian, leads to completely different emphases. Similarly, different views are found in the many liturgical uses, both Jewish and Christian, partly because each tradition has been influenced by its own commentary tradition. Other theological interpretations become apparent when we view or hear a psalm beyond the use of words alone, through Christian and Jewish art and music. This means that when we use reception history we have to talk about the ‘*theologies*’ of a particular psalm, as well as the ‘theologies’ of the Psalter as a whole.

⁷ See 35.10, 20; 36.10, 11; 37.11, 14; 38.8, 19; 39.2, 10; 40.14, 17; 41.1, 2. See F.L. HOSSFELD and E. ZENGER, Selig; J. BREMER, *Wo Gott*.

⁸ See S.E. GILLINGHAM, *The Poor*, 15-19.

⁹ My forthcoming commentary on Psalm 37 in *Psalms through the Centuries Volume Two: Psalms 1-72* brings out these implications in more detail, and much of what follows here is developed further in this work.

To return to the metaphor of the orchestra, my firm belief is that reception history has to start with the ‘musical score’ itself. The *text* is primary: all new interpretations, some of them resisting earlier readings, have to be measured in the light of the text. So first, a few comments about what Psalm 37 seems to say about poverty.

3.1. Psalm 37: A Test Case for assessing *Armentheologie* using Reception History

One important observation is that here the psalmist is actually wealthy, perhaps even a landowner, even though he clearly identifies with the rights of the poor and disenfranchised. Verse 25 (‘I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging for bread’) hardly suggests he is in abject poverty. Similarly, the two references to the righteous being generous, giving liberally, and lending (verses 21 and 26) suggest some access to material wealth. Furthermore, the literary form of this psalm, one of the seven acrostic psalms in the Psalter, suggests some access to education – and with this, to material resources.¹⁰ Its use of many of the aphorisms taken from the Book of Proverbs identifies the Psalmist with the proverbial sages, who in their day would be the educated middle-class.¹¹ My own view is that the psalmist is rather like some of prophets – educated, relatively well-off, but with a sympathy for the poor, and looking to the day when their cause will be vindicated by God. The situation of social deprivation reminds one of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah: the Persian period, with all its uncertainties about land possession, caused by factions within and foreign rule without, may well be the context for this psalm.

The reception history of this psalm, however, reveals that this bias to the poor can be viewed in many different ways. I shall assess, first, the early Jewish commentary tradition, which usually reads Psalm 37 in material and physical terms; I shall then examine the Christian commentary tradition, which tends to view this psalm in a more spiritual way.¹² Next I shall

¹⁰ Also Psalms 9-10; 25; 34; 111; 112 and 145.

¹¹ Verses 1-2: Prov 24.1,19 and 23.17; verses 5-6: Prov 16.3; verses 16-17: Prov 15.16 and 16.18; verses 21-22: Prov 3.33; verses 23-24: Prov 24.16; verses 30-31; Prov 10:31-32; and verses 32-33: Prov 1.11. See P.C. CRAGIE, *Psalms*, 297-99. Furthermore, the psalm has several links with Psalm 1, again suggesting a psalmist at the heart of the society, rather than at the fringes of it. For example, each expresses delight in Yahweh (37.4; see 1.2) and in keeping God’s law (37.31; see 1.2); each speaks of the wicked disappearing like chaff or smoke (37.20; see 1.4); each claims special protection for the righteous (37.39-40; see 1.6); each stresses the two ways (37.7,23; see 1.6). All this at least suggests a shared cultural context if not direct borrowing.

¹² I shall not be looking at the Greek and Latin translations in this case. Verses 14, 20 and 25 all pose problems in the additional third part of each verse, instead of the usual two-part acrostic form, but this adds nothing of real consequence for the reception of the psalm.

look at the use of Psalm 37 in liturgy, and at responses which are not exclusively verbal, in art and music; and finally I shall look at the contributions of contemporary writers. At the end I shall consider whether it is even possible to talk of a ‘theology of the poor’ in any absolute or unequivocal way, not least in relation to this psalm.

3.2. Jewish Reception in the Commentary Tradition

Most Jewish interpretations of Psalm 37 actually take place ‘outside the land’, so in each case they had to cope with the problem of dissonance, in that the promises of the ‘inheritance’ of the land had clearly not been fulfilled. One significant Jewish response is from *Qumran*. Although the provenance is only in the Judean desert, the sectarian community there considered themselves to be ‘in exile’, far from Jerusalem and its Temple. 4QpPs^a is an important scroll in this respect: it is a *peshet* on much of Psalm 37, with a frequent refrain ‘...the interpretation of it concerns...’¹³ So in Fragments 1-10, in Columns I, II, III and IV of the scroll, parts of verses 5-39 are read as a specific prophecy applying to the community at Qumran: *they* are ‘the congregation of the poor’, witnessing bitter disagreements between their ‘Teacher of Righteousness’ and the ‘Man of Lie’ (or the ‘Wicked Priest’, probably at the Jerusalem Temple). They claim a special protection from God, and their hope is distinctly physical and material: they claim they will possess ‘the whole world’ as their inheritance – and more particularly, that they ‘shall possess the Mountain of Israel for ever’. For example, verse 11 (‘the meek shall inherit the land’) is interpreted to refer to ‘the congregation of the Poor who shall accept the season of penance and shall be delivered from all the snares of Belial. Afterwards, all who possess the earth shall delight and prosper on exquisite food.’

Targum Psalms, compiled at least by the sixth century CE, probably with different versions serving different communities throughout the Diaspora, now reads ‘the wicked’ and ‘evildoers’ in Psalm 37 as oppressive *Gentiles* outside the community, rather than the other schismatic Jews, as at Qumran. Here there is no expectation of immediate re-possession of ‘the land’: the hope for restoration has now been deferred to the final day of judgement. So Ps 37.20, which speaks of the wicked eventually ‘vanishing like smoke’, is now a reference to the wicked Gentiles who will be punished at the final day of judgement: they will be destroyed in *the smoke of Gehenna*. And verse 33, which speaks of the cause of the righteous cause being

¹³ See M.F. HOGAN, *Pesharim* 195-98; also J. CARMIGNAC, *Interpretation*, 235-70; W.L. HOLLADAY, *Psalms*, 104-5; G.J. BROOKE, *Biblical*, 88-89.

upheld when brought to trial, now applies to those righteous Jews when they *stand for judgement* (i.e. also on the final day). The psalm is thus read in the light of the continual battle between the wicked Gentiles and the righteous Jews: some five hundred years since the destruction of the Temple, the idea of inheriting the land has here become a distant hope.

Midrash Tehillim, perhaps dating from as early as the ninth century, has a different perspective. Also recognizing that the promises of ‘inheriting the land’ have not been fulfilled, *Midrash* argues that rewards are no longer to be measured in terms of prosperity, but in terms of a *relationship with God*.¹⁴ Hence Psalm 37 is read alongside Psalm 73, because that psalm, which deals similarly with the prosperity of the wicked, stresses that a relationship with God is all important.¹⁵

However, commentators such as Rashi and Kimchi consistently refer to ‘inheriting the land’ in material terms. Writing from the perspective of persecution in western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries respectively, they read ‘the land’ as the reward for the righteous Jew, having endured for so long an experience of exile. Rashi is particularly clear about this.¹⁶ Kimchi reads the call to ‘Dwell in the land!’ in verse 3 quite literally: ‘the wicked will lose everything and the righteous will take what is left behind’.¹⁷

3.3. Christian Reception in the Commentary Tradition

Within early Christian commentaries a more spiritual reading is prevalent. The earliest example is in Mathew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, where ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’ (Matt 5.5) is a citation of Ps 37.11. Matthew uses the Septuagint version of this verse. So, like the LXX, which translates עני in verse 11 as *πραΰς*, meaning humble, or gentle of spirit, Matthew uses the same word, thus interpreting this verse as about a *poverty of spirit*.¹⁸ So ‘Blessed are the meek, *for they will inherit the earth*’ is a metaphor for receiving spiritual blessings, and, like other Beatitudes such as verse 8 (‘they will see God’) and verse 10 (‘they

¹⁴ See for example K. SCHAEFFER, *Psalms*, 94.

¹⁵ For example, in Ps 73.17-26 we read in verse 26 ‘My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.’ See W.G. BRAUDE, *Midrash*, 423.

¹⁶ See M.I. GRUBER, *Rashi’s*, 313.

¹⁷ Kimchi, cited in A. COHEN, *Psalms*, 112.

¹⁸ We may note that a similar word, עני, in verse 14, is translated in the LXX as *πτωχόν* (Greek Ps.36:14) meaning someone who is materially poor, even a beggar. So the Septuagint also sees the psalm as about both spiritual and physical poverty.

will inherit the kingdom of heaven’) the promise here is a metaphor for inheriting the kingdom of heaven.¹⁹

Early Christian commentators never read this psalm in the context of regaining the land and of rebuilding of Jerusalem: this was such an obviously Jewish belief that they deliberately distanced themselves from it. Instead, like Matthew, they spiritualized the idea of ‘inheriting the land’ in this psalm. For example, by the third century CE, Origen’s reading of verse 3 (‘Dwell in the land!’) is typically allegorical: this means ‘you will live in the land, and enjoy security’ and is interpreted as a reference to our need to purge our soul (‘the land’) from its faults so we may live in the security of God’s presence for ever.²⁰

By the fourth and fifth centuries, this view is the dominant one in early commentaries on this psalm. Augustine comments on verse 11 (‘the meek shall inherit the land’) that this is more about the importance of achieving meekness than inheriting the land; indeed, possessing God is far more important than wealth or any land possession: ‘You will possess God and God will possess you and you will need nothing else.’²¹ Augustine actually reads the whole psalm as about the indispensability of divine grace, seeing its counterpart in John 15.5 (‘without me you can do nothing’).²²

Cassiodorus, writing from his monastery in southern Italy a century and a half later, reads the psalm as ‘the voice of the Church for the correction of the people.’²³ So the whole psalm is about the abundant grace of God through Jesus Christ for his church. The land is the new Jerusalem, ‘a city filled with sweet blessings where inhabitants do not trade but feed on their delight on God’.²⁴ Hence the familiar references in verses 3 and 11 are an encouragement to Christians to contemplate Christ, for the satisfaction of their soul.²⁵ The reference in verse 9 (‘those who wait on the Lord shall inherit the land’) is about our acquiring the future city of

¹⁹ The fact that Psalm 37 is not cited in Luke’s version of the Beatitudes in Luke 6.20-26, with its more material promises, reinforces this view.

²⁰ Origen, *Homily 1 on Psalm 37.3*. See C.A. BLAISING and C.S. HARDIN, 290

²¹ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 37.12*. See C.A. BLAISING and C.S. HARDIN, Psalms, 293.

²² Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 37.16*. See C.A. BLAISING and C.S. HARDIN, Psalms, 296.

²³ Cassiodorus *Explanation of the Psalms 37.11*. See P.G. WALSH, *Explanation*, 357. It is interesting to set this against an earlier concern of Cassiodorus when he was Praetorian Prefect for Italy under the Ostrogothic kings Theodoric (c.524 CE) and Athalaric (c.526 CE). In his *Varia*, a 12-volume collection of letters compiled c. 537 CE, we read of several examples of his defence of disputes about land ownership: these varied between the preservation of royal estates and ecclesial property under the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy, and, at the other extreme, the protections of inheritance rights when widows had died intestate. See <http://www.archive.org/stream/thelettersofcass18590gut/18590-8.txt> .

²⁴ This could not be further removed from the community at Qumran. See Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms 37.11*, P.G. WALSH, *Explanation*, 362, and C.A. BLAISING and C.S. HARDIN, Psalms, 293.

²⁵ Cassiodorus *Explanation of the Psalms 37.11*. See P.G. WALSH, *Explanation*, 359.

the Lord; in verse 18 ('The LORD knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will abide forever') informs us that our inheritance is '*heavenly Jerusalem* most rich in eternal peace.'²⁶

A few Christian commentators read Psalm 37 literally, noting that it really is about unfair distribution of wealth, even though they do not read it as about claims for land inheritance as the Jews did. Ambrose of Milan, for example, uses verse 21 ('the righteous are generous and keep giving') as about the importance of lending money without interest – but then allegorises the verse, arguing that this is not really about lending money generously, but about sharing one's faith with the Gentiles.²⁷ Aquinas's reading of the psalm similarly begins with teaching on wealth – that it is better to have a little and to be just than to have much and to be unjust – but then he too develops this into reading the psalm as an example of Christ's suffering, whose model of obedience was to resist evil and to act justly; Christ's suffering on the cross, facing evil without anger, reveals how good can come out of innocent suffering.²⁸

John Calvin has an interesting reading of this psalm: noting that rich men (for example Lazarus in Luke 16.20-31) have been reduced to being beggars, he questions the observation of the sage in verse 25 ('I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread') and notes that the psalm cannot therefore be about the promises of material gain for obedience and trust. This then allows him to argue that the ethos of this psalm must be about spiritual blessings, and that the psalm has been fulfilled in Christ.²⁹

3.4. Reception through Liturgy

The liturgical use of the psalms is usually influenced by Jewish and Christian commentary tradition. In Jewish liturgy, it is perhaps ironic that verse 25 ('I have never seen the righteous forsaken, or their children begging bread') is used as a Grace after meals, assuming its teaching is about God's apparent provision for all our needs. Christian worship uses very different verses, such as 30-31, about the witness of the righteous ('The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom') and on 39-40, on God's ultimate vindication of the righteous ('The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord'). Hence the psalm is used in Orthodox liturgy to commemorate the

²⁶ Cassiodorus *Explanation of the Psalms* 37.11. See P.G. WALSH, *Explanation*, 362 and 365.

²⁷ Ambrose, *Commentary on Twelve Psalms* 37.62 in C.A. BLAISING and C.S. HARDIN, *Psalms*, 297. A more literal application of lending money without interest is found in illuminated manuscripts, which will be seen shortly.

²⁸ See T.F. RYAN, *Thomas*, 121, 195.

²⁹ J. CALVIN, *Commentary*, 3. Calvin is however not entirely novel, but dependent upon the commentaries of the fathers (for example Ambrose) who also cited Lazarus and noted other scriptural examples of begging for food (Jacob and his family going down to Egypt in famine; Elijah and the woman from Zarephath).

Feast of John the Baptist and other followers of Christ who have endured martyrdom. So again in Jewish tradition the material implications of the psalm are more in view; meanwhile, in Christian tradition, the spiritual implications are more to the fore.

3.5. Reception through Christian Art

However, many Christian illuminated Psalters illustrate that the teaching in the psalm is about social justice for the materially poor. One ninth-century Carolingian example is the *Utrecht Psalter*, with its typical visual exegesis of the ‘narrative’ of each psalm. Psalm 37 (fol.21r), is dominated by an image of Christ in the heavens with six angels.³⁰ The rest of the illustration presents different scenes of justice and injustice noted in the psalm. The psalmist sits just below Christ, before a lectern containing a book and a pair of scales. Two young men stand beside him, and a personification of the sun is placed above the book and scales (‘He shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light and thy judgment as the noonday,’ as in verse 6). On a hill four righteous men are being served at a table by an attendant (‘in the days of famine they shall be satisfied,’ as in verse 19). Beside the table an angel is supporting another ‘righteous’ man who is about to fall (verse 24). In the middle register at the right a man is distributing provisions to a group of poor and needy (verse 26). At the left a group of people is pointing at a man falling out of a tree (verse 35) as if from his ‘high estate’ (verse 36).

Another ninth century Carolingian example, the *Stuttgart Psalter*, has three images which focus on the wicked rich and the righteous poor. Fol.45v represents the wicked as idolaters (verse 1); and fol.46v shows the wicked attacking the poor and needy (verse 14). A more spiritual interpretation is found in fol.47r, which shows the psalmist being upheld, literally, by the hand of God (verse 24).³¹ Again, however, we may note the lack of interest in any verses which suggest inheritance of the land, whether physical or spiritual.

Given the teaching against usury throughout the early Byzantine Empire, it is not surprising that relevant verses from Psalm 37 were illustrated in striking ways in Byzantine Psalters. The second and third of the three images in the ninth century *Khludov Psalter* are good examples of this. The second image (fol.35r) is an image of Charity, dressed as a woman, in royal garments, distributing alms; this is taken from verse 26 (‘They are ever giving liberally and lending’) and she, Charity, is giving liberally to some monks; an inscription, in Greek,

³⁰ See <http://psalter.library.uu.nl/page?p=48&res=1&x=0&y=0>

³¹ On fol.45v, see goo.gl/AehY4Y; on fol.46v, see <https://goo.gl/9X9XGX>; and on fol. 47r see <https://goo.gl/yAAec8>.

reads ‘Holy and good Charity teaches and manifests her own glory; and happy is he who will do and will teach’. The third image (fol.35v) illustrates verse 35 (‘I have seen the wicked oppressing ...’) and is of John Grammarian (a figure associated with Simon Magus, a heretic who was denounced at the Council of Nicaea). He holds a money bag in his right hand, and a basket full of coins is on his left. He is inspired by a small demon. He is a sorcerer: he holds a serpent in his left hand (in the manner of the magicians in Egypt in Exod 7.11-12), and his shock of hair stands on end, so he looks like the devil who inspires him. This is a figure which Christians, rich and poor alike, should not emulate.³²

Another related representation is in the eleventh century Byzantine *Theodore Psalter*, (fol.43v). Here Charity is personified as a male figure, with branches growing out of his crown, seated on a chsioned chair with a footstool; as in the *Khludov Psalter* he is giving alms to a group of clerics from a container of coins.³³ This is the right use of charitable giving taken from the psalm.

A more modern illustration which also reads the psalm as defending the poor and oppressed is by the artist Arthur Wragg, whose stark black and white cartoons are set in England during the Great Depression in the 1930s. His image depicts verse 40 (‘the Lord helps them and rescues them’); it is hard to know if this is to be read as ironic or hopeful. But the ‘meek’ and ‘righteous poor’ are now the economically deprived: they walk the streets, abject and helpless, overshadowed by dark mills. They await some physical restitution.³⁴

3.6. Reception through Christian Music

Musical compositions focus on both the spiritual and material understanding of poverty in this psalm. Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* falls into the former category, where the angel sings verse 7 (‘Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him’ when Elijah has fled to the wilderness.³⁵ By contrast William Byrd’s motet, based on verses 25-28, is a deliberate selection of verses based upon social responsibility: ‘I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the

³² See K. CORRIGAN, Visual, 28-29.

³³ The *Theodore Psalter* can be viewed in Turning Pages on the British Library website. For this image, see http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_19352_f043v.

³⁴ See A. WRAGG, Psalms, on Psalm 37 (no page number).

³⁵ In Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* Ps 37.7,4,5 and 1 are all used in Part Two; the piece follows no. 30, ‘Arise Elijah’ which is a recitative between angel and prophet. The setting is Elijah’s flight to the wilderness, tortured by self-doubt but looked after by angels. ‘O rest in the Lord’ (no. 31) is based especially on verse 7 (‘Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him’), as part of the encouragement to Elijah to return to face Ahab and the prophets of Baal.

righteous forsaken...’) So too is Herbert Howell’s *Three Psalms Preludes (Set 1)*; the second of these, on Psalm 37, corresponds in many ways with Wragg’s visual representation. This piece which was composed during the First World War, published in 1921, and popularised in the 1930s.³⁶ Its mood is shared with the other two psalms in the set: Ps 34.6 is a piece evoking hope for the downtrodden, and Ps 23.4, on everlasting life for the departed. All three pieces are for the organ only and the one here is based on Ps 37.11. The initial use of the minor key creates an introspective and anxious mood, but this quiet opening rises to an impassioned climax leading to verse 11 (‘the meek shall inherit the land’); this then transforms to a diminuendo with a major tonality as the vindication of the poor is envisaged.

3.7. Reception through Jewish Art

Returning to art, a typical concern for the materially poor is also found in Jewish illustrations of this psalm. *The Parma Psalter*, from about 1290, is the oldest known complete Hebrew illustrated manuscript. It is a lavish Psalter: so its colourful illustrations, even of a psalm about justice for the poor, suggest that, like the psalmist, this the work of one who is not poor but seeks to side with the poor – in this case, the Jewish community undergoing persecution and isolation in thirteenth century northern Italy. The *Parma Psalter* has very few full human figures (mostly the figures are of animals, or of animals with human heads) but in fol.48B, over Psalm 37, the illumination, encompassing the first word of the psalm in Hebrew (לִלְדוֹת), is of a figure, in a dark blue hooded garment, bending his face upwards to the heavens: he has white hair and an aged face. The illustration suggests verse 25 (‘and now I am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging for bread. They are ever giving liberally and lending...’) , and so by implication reveals the interest in the issue of justice, from those who have, on behalf of those who have not, reflected in this psalm.

Contemporary Jewish illustrations of Psalm 37 focus not only on the materially poor but also on the theme of the land. For example, the Kabbalistic artist Moshe Tzvi HeLevi Berger, who until 2002 was director of the Museum of Psalms in Jerusalem, reads the psalm in a land-orientated way. His image of Psalm 37 was made in the late 1990s, and in the light of the events after 1948, it reflects the ongoing insecurities of land possession, and so accords with the sentiments of the psalmist we noted earlier. It depicts the city of Jerusalem being protected in what seems to be a golden globe (or even a tear-drop) set against hues of red, blue

³⁶ Herbert Howells, *Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1*. Op 32 (1915-16). See S. DOWLING LONG and J.F.A. SAWYER, *Bible*, 242.

and silver each containing Hebrew calligraphy. The focus is on verse 3 ('Dwell in the land and enjoy security!'). The artist comments most pertinently: "King David's advice is to the one who does good - only he has merit to dwell in the land. And then this land may nurture him with faith, for it is a holy land, a land where the Almighty's blessings will remain forever."³⁷

3.8. Reception through Jewish Music

The same literal interpretation of 'inheriting the land' is also evident in a good deal of Jewish music. One very recent example is Shulamit Ran's 'The humble shall inherit the earth', composed for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the New York Virtuoso Singers in 2012.³⁸ It uses the constancy of the voices of the male cantors to evoke sonority and calm, whilst the experimental – sometimes cacophonous – harmonies of the alto and soprano voices suggest transformation and change. The piece moves from verses 25, 35, 36, 29 to 11, and so changes from exuberance to silence as it considers a day when the earth might be imbued with a time of peace.³⁹

3.9. Reception in Contemporary Discourse

And so, finally, we turn to more contemporary writings. Many of these now demonstrate an interesting shift in 'universalising' the psalm, so that the 'poor' are understood to be those materially impoverished everywhere, and the 'land' includes the entire 'earth' where injustice to the poor prevails. Beth Tanner, in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Psalm 37, sums this up well: "This psalm needs little translation in today's world...it is now clear that many, many bankers, con artists, and mortgage brokers feed off the dreams and hopes of those who have less resources and education. .. The psalm offers a pair of glasses with a longer vision that offers us a way to see the world through kingdom eyes. There are values that

³⁷ http://www.biblical-art.com/artwork.asp?id_artwork=15170&showmode=Full; also <http://themuseumofpsalms.com/gallery-item/the-psalms-series/>.

³⁸ See '25 x 25: 25 Premieres for 25 Years', by The New York Virtuoso Singers, conductor Harold Rosenbaum, Soundbrush Records 2013, SR1027.

³⁹ One other obvious example where the theme is the gift of the land is Otto Goldschmidt's *Ruth* (op 20, 1867) composed for the London Three Choir Festival. Psalm 37 was used with some twelve other psalms, and it highlights Ruth's preparedness to go to a land she does not know.

last and make for peace and those that are transitory and destroy, even if at the time the latter look tempting'.⁴⁰

This appropriation also permits the freedom to question a key assumption made by the psalmist, namely his certitude that material rewards – the land itself – would be given to the poor. So the poem by Edmund Blunden, again from the Great Depression, and entitled 'Report on Experience', reverses the observations of the sage in verse 25.⁴¹ Blunden reflects:

I have been young, and now am not too old;
And I have seen the righteous forsaken,
His health, his honour and his quality taken.
This is not what we were formerly told.

Robert Carroll adds a further comment: 'Too many Jewish children begged in the streets and ghettos of the Third Reich (not to mention through the long history of Christian Europe) for the modern reader to be impressed by its writer's faith. ... We cannot now read the text without reflecting on how false it sounds...'⁴²

This echoes the sentiments of Jacqueline Osherow, in her poem entitled 'Psalm 37 at Auschwitz'. She concludes that, after the horrors of the Holocaust, the promises offered in Psalm 37 just do not accord with Jewish experience.⁴³ There is an obvious contradiction between the faith of the psalmist in verse 10 ('just a little longer and there will be no wicked one') and the experience of Auschwitz. Osherow also considers the phrase in verse 25 ('I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging for bread.'). This is because, for Jews, it is such a familiar verse, being used as a Grace after meals. She reflects on the word 'begging' – and notes there was plenty of that. She reflects sardonically on whether the psalmist intended his people to survive on faith alone. The poem ends

(Hear O Israel, et cetera) and a psalm.
Or not even a whole psalm. Just one line.
All those people waiting. Couldn't one of them
Have mumbled to a brother, a father, a son

*(The women, of course, were on another line
And this was not a psalm they would have known),
Just a little longer and there will be no wicked one;*

⁴⁰ B.L. TANNER, Psalm 37, 354.

⁴¹ 'Report on Experience' is in E. BLUNDEN, Poems, 284 cited in R.P. CARROLL, Discombobulations, 68-9.

⁴² R.P. CARROLL, Discombobulations, 69.

⁴³ See J. OSHEROW, Dead, 60-4.

Just a little longer... he'll be gone.

Walter Brueggemann similarly resists some of the assumptions in the psalm and universalises its ancient setting. He first reminds us, like Tanner, that in the psalm ‘...property, security, wealth and power are here drawn into world of faith’.⁴⁴ He also argues that the voice in verse 25 seems to be that of a self-assured property-owning middle class, but this then assumes –somewhat questionably – that the system of land-ownership works.⁴⁵ He notes the irony in that the voice is of one who considers himself ‘blameless’ (verses 18 and 37, using תמים and תם). The core message is that indifferent land ownership is not viable, and that exploitation of the poor damages not only all those who dwell in the land but the land itself.⁴⁶

Much of this is echoed by Eleuterio R. Ruiz, in his monograph on Psalm 37, *Das Land ist für die Armen da* (2015). Like Erhard Gerstenberger, his experience of working with the landless in Brazil, as well as in Argentina, gives his writing a cutting edge, and he pleads for the need for a prophetic vision that the justice of God will overturn the present realities of the poor and exploited. He argues that, whatever our own situation, the psalm shows us that it is our ability to *identify* with the poor and landless which makes all the difference.⁴⁷

4. Conclusions: Reception History, and the Theologies of Psalm 37

So how does Psalm 37 bear witness to a ‘Theology of Poverty’? Initially, we can see from its reception history that there are many testimonies, not just one. In the Jewish commentary tradition the key concern is about *land*, and about the ongoing exile from Jerusalem, and the need to return to it. In the Christian commentary tradition the main readings of this psalm are not about Jerusalem at all, but about our spiritual inheritance: the Christian is the ‘righteous one’ who will be rewarded by God. Artistic representations take a more practical, social and even political view: the ‘righteous’ are now those who give to the poor. Musical arrangements frequently lament the loss of justice in the world. Some contemporary readings also focus on the theme of injustice - but not only human, but divine as well, in the light of the Holocaust. Other contemporary readings interpret the ‘land’ as the ‘whole earth’ so that the Jewish

⁴⁴ W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Psalms*, 235-57; here, 237.

⁴⁵ W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Psalms*, 239.

⁴⁶ W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Psalms*, 257.

⁴⁷ E.R. RUIZ, *Land*, 105-106.

particularism is universalised: the psalm incites anyone concerned about injustice, anywhere, to act on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

So where does this leave us? Does reception history simply fragment any attempt to produce a coherent theology of any one psalm, let alone the Psalter as a whole? In some ways I would argue that this is precisely the challenge which the reception history approach presents, preventing any one commentator attempting to control the meaning of a text. However, within this diversity of views it is possible to see one unifying theme which incorporates all the others. This is the teaching on the importance of *justice*, both human and divine. Human justice should mirror divine justice, and this has to result in restitution, both material and spiritual, for all who are deprived of their basic human rights. As Brueggemann and Ruiz argue, Psalm 37 challenges every generation to set aside their indifference to the exploitation of the vulnerable and poor. We only have to turn on our national news to see where this might lead us, whether in Africa, Asia, the Middle East or Latin America - or even on our own doorstep. Walter Brueggemann should have the last word on the unifying aspect of the theology of this psalm, taken from his *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, written more than twenty years ago: 'The psalm is to be read not as congratulations for the landed but as a ground of hope for the landless.'⁴⁸ In this observation the different facets of the reception history of Psalm 37, both Jewish and Christian, unite.

⁴⁸ W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Psalms*, 249.

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