Chapter 14 (Response 1)

A Song 'Forever New' in the Psalms

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What did the psalmists mean when they referred to a 'new song'? The term is used in six psalms. I ask this question because it has not been asked explicitly in any of the other papers, although the evidence for a new song has been taken for granted. Indeed, this is not only part of the title of this publication but also the heading over Michael Symmons Roberts' initial poem, which speaks of a 'new song' as a raw compulsion, singing 'what you never could say', in good times and bad.

Most contributors have emphasised our need to bring 'something new' out of ancient and often mysterious biblical poems. John Goldingay does this with Genesis 49, seeing the text as a collective replay of remembered tribal traditions for a later age. Robert Hayward, in examining the early Jewish and Christian liturgical use of Exodus 15, argues that its central role in worship is evidence of it being 'forever new'. David Firth reads Hannah's prayer 1 Samuel 2 in a similar way: its 'Magnificat-like' emphasis on exalting the lowly is a theme found not only in the rest of 1-2 Samuel, but lives on in later Jewish and Christian texts. Other authors find the 'newness' in the contemporary performance of selected psalms (for example Ellen Davis, especially using Psalms 38 and 42-3, and Benjamin Sommer, focussing on Psalms 27 and 114, and Shah Held, on Psalm 88). Others see this is in the continuing relevance, through the ambiguity of the poetry, of texts such as Isaiah 45 (Katie Heffelfinger) and Hosea 7–12 (Yisca Zimran). June Dickie notes that 'newness' is always a challenge in translation, as seen for example when translating Psalms 133 and 134 into Zulu. A wide spectrum is covered here: but no author has given an account of that actual phrase, 'new song', a term used almost exclusively in the Psalter.[1]

The fact that the phrase occurs primarily in psalmody suggests that this is a liturgical formula. If so, it was adapted in many different ways. It is found in two psalms near the end of Book One, two psalms in the middle of Book Four, and two psalms near the end of Book Five.[2] The six examples are as follows:[3]

> Sing to him a **new song** (שִׁיר חָדָשׁ);
> play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
>
> Ps 33:3

[1] The exhortation to sing a 'new song' occurs also in Is. 42:10; Jud. 16:1; and Rev.5:9 and 14:3.
[2] Interestingly it does not occur in Book Two, with its more nostalgic tone of longing for Jerusalem and vindication from suffering, nor in Book Three, with its harsher judgmental tone in remembering the destruction of both the northern and southern kingdoms.
[3] The translation and versification used here is from the NRSV.

He put a **new song** in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the LORD.

Ps 40:3

O sing to the LORD a **new song**;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.

Ps 96:1

O sing to the LORD a **new song**,
for he has done marvelous things.
His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

Ps 98:1

I will sing a **new song** to you, O God;
upon a ten-stringed harp I will play to you.

Ps 144:9

Praise the LORD!
Sing to the LORD a **new song**,
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

Ps 149:1

Four of these references are exhortations to the congregation to sing the song with the psalmist (Pss 33, 96, 98 and 149). Two psalms (33 and 144) also refer to the new song being accompanied by stringed instruments. So other than Psalm 40 (whose peculiar character we shall consider later) the new song clearly appears within a liturgical context.[4]

Is there any common theme that might point to the content of this new song? Four psalms praise God's sovereignty over the cosmos (Pss 33, 96, 98, 149), but praise of God as Creator is also found in other 'creation hymns' such as Pss 8, 19, 29, and 104, and in other kingship hymns such as Pss 95, 97 and 99. Another shared theme might be the belief that God is about to bring in a 'new thing' (עֹשֶׂה חֲדָשָׁה) in history.[5] Each psalm, however, expresses this differently. In Psalm 33 this comes through the created order; in Psalm 40 it is in the life of the individual; in Psalms 96 and 98 it is on account of God's universal rule as King; in Psalm 144 it includes the restitution of the poor; and in Psalm 149 it involves a military initiative against other nations. This is probably why the compilers never brought these psalms together into a separate category, such as is the case with the Songs of Ascent (Pss 120–134).

[4] There are many other references in the Psalter to singing 'a song': examples include 26:7; 28:7; 42:8; 68:4; 69:30; 81:2; 83:1; 137:4 and 147:1. It is however the '*new* song' that is our concern here.
[5] The fact the phrase 'new thing' (Is. 43:19) or 'new things' (Is.42:9 and 48:6 (חֲדָשׁוֹת)) is found in only in Isaiah suggests that the phrase 'new song' is attributable to this prophet.

So is their newness about their being composed for a new tune, or a new accompaniment to an old tune?[6] Psalms 33, 98, 144 and 149 all have references to musical accompaniment and Psalm 40 has as its heading 'to the chief musician'. Only Psalm 96 makes no specific reference to accompanying music. Other psalms, however, refer to the harp (כִּנּוֹר) as in 43:4; 49:4; 57:8; 71:22; 81:2; 92:3; 108:2; and 137:2 and 150:3; others refer to the trumpet (שׁוֹפָר) as in 47:5; 81:3; and 150:4; and a lyre (נֵבֶל) as in 57:8; 81:3; 92:3; 108:2; 147:7; and 150:3 and a tambourine (תֹּף) as in 81:2; 149:3 and 150:4, and strings (מְנִּים) as in 150:4. Seven psalms (Psalms 4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67, 76) have the rubric 'with stringed instruments' (בִּנְגִינוֹת) but none of these are in our selection. So although musical accompaniment is taken for granted in singing a 'new song', this does not mark off our six psalms as being essentially different.

Furthermore, all six psalms use formulaic language found in other psalms, particularly those on each side of them.[7] For example, *Psalm 33*, one of only two psalms in Book One without a superscription, and probably a late psalm, has a close linguistic relationship with Psalm 32. The אַשְׁרֵי *makarismos* in verse 12 is also found in 32:1-2 (and 34:8); the concern with right 'counsel' (Hebrew עֵצָה) in verse 11 is also found in 32:8, whilst the 'eye of the LORD' in verse 18 is in 32:8; and like 32:10-11, verse 21 ends with an appeal to the people to 'be glad' and 'trust' in God.

Similarly *Psalm 40*, which has such an odd internal order, with its prayer for help following the thanksgiving, has clear links with Psalm 39. Its preoccupation with death in verses 2 and 14 echo 39:4-6, 11 and 13; the vow of silence in 39:1-2, 9 contrasts with 40:9, where the healed psalmist cannot 'restrain his lips'. Both psalms are strikingly physical: Psalm 39 speaks mainly of the mouth and tongue (verses 1, 3, 9), whilst Psalm 40 is aware not only of the mouth (verse 3) and the lips (verse 9) but also of feet (verse 2) ears (verse 6) heart (verses 10, 12) and life itself (verse 14).

Psalm 96, probably an exilic psalm, also has particular links with the psalm before it. Psalm 95:1-7 is about singing to God, and 96:1-6 develops this further. The God of 'salvation' in 96:2 is also found in 95:1; and the celebration of the kingship of God in 96:4 and 10 echoes 95:3, where God is a 'great king' (מֶלֶךְ גָּדוֹל). His superiority over all other gods (עַל־כָּל־אֱלֹהִים) is found in both 96:4 and in 95:3. The *hishtaphel* form of the verb חוה (to bow down) in 96:9, albeit a common expression, is also found in 95:6. The theme of rejoicing in 96:12 is also found at in 95:1 (both using the verb רנן).

Psalm 98, perhaps another exilic psalm, has correspondences with both 96 and 97. As well as the identical call to 'sing a new song' (96:1 and 98:1) we find the same jussive appeals to praise in 98:7-9 ('Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live

[6] See R. Tomes, 'Sing to the Lord a New Song', in *Psalms and Prayers. Papers Read at the Joint Meeting of the Society for Old Testament Study and Het Oud Testamentisch erkgezelschap in Nederland en België, Apeldoorn August 2006,* Oudtestamentische Studiën, Old Testament Studies Volume 55, Leiden, Brill, 2007, pp.237-52, here p. 239.

[7] Much of what follows has been influenced by my reception history commentary on these psalms. See S.E. Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries: A Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1–72. Volume Two.* Blackwell Bible Commentaries. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2018, and *Psalms Through the Centuries: A Reception History Commentary on Psalms 73–150. Volume Three.* Blackwell Bible Commentaries. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell forthcoming 2021.

in it…') and 96:11–13 ('Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it…'). Psalm 98 also has associations with 97. Both are concerned with 'righteousness and judgement' (97:2; 98:9). The personification of the 'earth' (אֶרֶץ) in verses 3 and 4, which 'rejoices' and 'sees' God's salvation, is also found in 97:1 and 4. The mountains are also personified in each psalm: in verse 7 they 'shout for joy', whilst in 97:5 they 'melt' at God's presence. In verse 6 we read הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוָה ('The LORD is king') whilst in 97:1 the phrase is יְהוָה מָלָךְ ('The LORD reigns').

Psalm 144 is distinctive, in that it is actually little more than an anthology of other psalms. It is likely to be a late psalm, making particular use of Psalm 18 (which itself is linked to the almost identical 2 Sam 22) and of Psalm 8 (with its own distinctive links with Genesis 1). For example, the blessing formula בָּרוּךְ in verse 1 is the same as 18:46, both in the context of God as 'rock'. Other combined images of protection (fortress, stronghold, deliverer, shield, refuge) clearly link verses 1-2 with 18:1-3. The theophany account in verses 5-8 again indicates some borrowing from 18:7-19. Verse 10 reminds us of 18:50 concerning King David's archetypal dependency on God for protection. The use of Ps. 8:4 in 144:3-4 ('what are human beings that you regard them? …') serves to democratise these royal promises. Hence the links with the preceding psalm are more general: Psalm 143 is also anthological in its use of other psalms (25, 69, 77, 86, 119), and like 144 it also uses Psalm 18.

Psalm 149, probably another late psalm, also takes up themes from other psalms: in this second to last psalm in the MT Psalter its military language about God's judgement on the nations (verses 7-9) reminds us of Psalm 2, also concerned with the kingship of God and Mount Zion: 149:8 speaks of God binding his enemies with chains of iron (בְּכַבְלֵי בַרְזֶל) whilst Ps. 2:9 speaks of God breaking the nations with a rod of iron (בְּשֵׁבֶט בַּרְזֶל). Perhaps in this case the 'new song' is not only 149, but 150, which can be seen as the 'new song' for the entire Psalter. Both psalms start with 'Praise the LORD' (הַלְלוּ יָהּ) which takes place in the 'assembly of the faithful' in 149:1 and the 'sanctuary' in 150:1.

It is interesting to observe that the concern in our two psalms in Book One is with the God who has acted *in the past,* both in the cosmos (33) and in the life of the individual (40), whilst the concern of Psalms 96 and 98 in Book Four is with the God who reigns as King *in the present,* and the concerns of Psalms 144 and 149 in Book Five is with that God will do *in the future.* In some ways this fits with the characteristic tone in each of these three books.[8]

A further observation is that although each psalm appears to be a self-contained unit, its proximity to its neighbours gives a second level of meaning to the 'new song'. Psalm 33 could be read as the new song following the confession and answered prayer for healing in 32; the first part of Psalm 40 could be read as the answer to the prayer in 39; Psalm 96 could be the song which is promised in Psalm 95:1-7; Psalm 98 becomes the song about God's reign anticipated in Psalm 97; Psalm 144 is the new song which, in terms of its reference to the king, fulfils the aspirations of Psalm 143. Perhaps most significantly of all, on this

[8] More could be said about this. See for example S.E. Gillingham, 'Psalms of David, Psalms of Christ' in *Rooted and Grounded: Faith Formation and the Christian Tradition* (ed. S. Croft) Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2019, pp. 69-85 and the bibliography there.

understanding, Psalm 149, which relates to the psalms before it, anticipates the greatest song of all, Psalm 150.

Thus far we have established that each psalmist adapted the formula 'new song' to suit the form and contents of their own thanksgiving or hymn, and that the compilers may well have placed these psalms in an appropriate literary context where the song now takes on a newer orientation in relation to other psalms near it. '*Forever new'* is the watchword here. The song is 'new' to each of the psalmists in question; but it also becomes 'new' again as later compilers placed each 'new song' in relation to a previous prayer or call to praise. But then each song continues to be 'forever new' as it is used by Jews and Christians in different circumstances over the centuries. This affirms what has been said by other contributors regarding the performative nature of Hebrew poetry in general and psalmody in particular: each 'new song' has a variety of afterlives within later communities of faith.

In what follows, I intend to explore briefly just how this 'forever newness' works out with each of the six psalms in question.[9]

Book One: Psalms 33 and 40

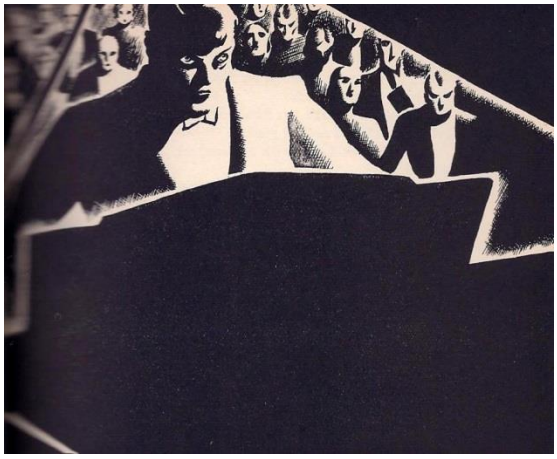
In *Psalm 33:3* the new song accompanies the 'word of the LORD' which brings out the heavens, the waters of the deep and the inhabitants of the world (vv. 6–8). It is as if creation itself accompanies the song of the faithful, rather like the heavens telling the glory of God in Ps 19:1–4, or the 'voice of the LORD' in the storm in Psalm 29. It is somewhat disappointing, therefore, to find that early Christian writers diminish the creation-orientated aspects of the new song by applying it to the church rather than to the cosmos. Basil the Great, for example, reads the 'new song' as about *us* as psalteries and *our bodies* as the instruments of praise.[10] The literal meaning of the 'harp of ten strings' (33:2), the musical accompaniment for this song of creation, is even allegorised on account of the pagan associations of music. Augustine, for example, sees the ten strings are the ten commandments, and we 'pluck the Psaltery' by *fulfilling* the Law: 'Let nobody's thoughts revert to the musical instruments of the theatre'.[11]

This bias is fortunately not evident in Renaissance art, when we see the 'new song' as a hymn celebrated in music: one example is Raphael's painting of St. Cecilia with the Apostles Paul, John, Augustine and Mary Magdalene: the choir of angels in the cloud above the scene are singing verses from 33:1-3.[12]

In another more recent image, dating from the 1930s, the cathartic power of this new song is also linked to the restorative power of music. Arthur Wragg's black and white cartoon is accompanied by a caption below which reads: *'Praise the Lord with the lyre… Sing to him a new song' (Ps.33:2-3).* Only the face of the man at the keyboard is seen above the lid of the piano, but it is clear that he is in some sort of theatre from the black and white images of

[9] Here I adapt again my work on my Reception History Commentary on the Psalms. See note 7 above.
[10] *Homilies on the Psalms* 15.2 (Ps 33) in FC 46:229-30, cited in *Psalms 1–50.* Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture VII (eds. C.A. Blaising and C. S. Hardin), Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press,2008:247.
[11] *Expositions of the Psalms 33.6 WSA* 3 15:398-99, cited in *ibid:*247. We may also note that the reference to the 'ten-stringed harp' in Psalm 144 is interpreted in the same way.)
[12] See https://www.pinacotecabologna.beniculturali.it/en/content_page/item/2811-st-cecilia-with-saints-paul-john-the-evangelist-augustine-and-mary-magdalen-ecstasy-of-st-cecilia.

faces caught in the shadows behind him. The man has an intent expression. The bitter world of the Great Depression is at present forgotten. It is impossible to know whether Wragg also had in mind verse 19 ('… to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine') but what is clear is that here and now the music in this new song is transformative.[13]



'Praise the Lord with the lyre … Sing to him a new song' (Ps.33:2–3)

What of the afterlives of *Psalm 40:3?* Originally this seems to be a song of deliverance from near-death experience (verses 2 and 14), and this is what is continued in Jewish tradition, where it is argued that David composed this new song after the illness in Psalm 39 had left him.[14] We noted earlier the linkage between Ps 40 and Ps 39, and this is also taken up in Igor Stravinsky's first two movements of his *Symphony of Psalms,* using Ps. 39:12-13 and 40:1-4.[15] Much of the second movement, from Psalm 40, is a four-voice double fugue. The 'new song' is announced by a trombone which re-uses some of the initial fugue (suggesting that this is not an entirely new song). The movement ends with a piccolo trumpet again recalling the initial fugue - as if the memory of waiting for God to act is being considered all over again.[16]

This new song in Ps. 40:3 has another well-known contemporary application since it became a watchword of the Irish rock band U2.[17] The song is called '40' by Bono, and was originally part of their 1983 album, *War*; this verse has been performed over four hundred times since then. At the end of every performance the band finishes with '40' and then leaves the stage – the singers first, then guitarists, and finally the drummer. The audience sings 'How long to sing this song?', continuing as the lights go up and they turn to the exits. The repeated chorus goes:

I will sing, sing a new song.

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[13] See A. Wragg,1934. *The Psalms for Modern Life*. New York: Claude Kendall, 1934 (no page number)
[14] See A.C. Feuer, A.C. (trans. and commentary), *Tehillim: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*. Nineteenth Impression. New York: Mesorah Publications, 2004, pp. 497-98.
[15] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3Swan5TF_8.
[16] See J.M. LeMon, 'Symphonizing the Psalms: Igor Stravinsky's Musical Exegesis' in *Interpretation* 71 (2017):25-49. Psalm 150 is the third psalm analyzed here.
[17] See www.u2.com/music/lyrics/2 .

I will sing, sing a new song
How long to sing this song?
How long to sing this song?
How long, how long, how long
How long to sing this song?

So thousands of U2 fans, with little knowledge of the Bible, let alone the psalms, are given the last word on Psalm 40. The full content of the 'new song' might not be understood, but this does not prevent it having closure.[18]

We have noted how the new song in Psalm 40 is different from the other five in being a personal testimony of faith. Not surprisingly it has been re-used in this way. Two examples must suffice. One is Charles Wesley, having returned from his missionary work in Georgia, already ordained and still supporting the 'Holy Club' in Oxford. Wesley, in hindsight, did not consider he had been converted until he read (on May 21st, 1738) Ps. 40:3: 'He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God'. By the next day he had apparently composed 'And can it be, that I should gain an interest in my Saviour's blood?'.[19]

A second example is Gerard Manley Hopkins' version, composed in 1864, which combines Ps. 40:3 with imagery from Ps. 65:10-13:

He hath abolished the old drouth
And rivers run where all was dry.
The field is sopp'd with merciful dew.
He hath put a new song in my mouth,
The words are old, the purport new….[20]

Book Four: Psalms 96 and 98

Psalm 96 addresses other nations, with their deities 'dethroned', and calls the people to praise the true LORD (vv. 7–10). The twin themes of the new song and the nothingness of other gods are also used in Isa. 42:10–12 and 43:16–21 which suggests that the exile in Babylon was the context for this psalm. It was known by the time of the Chronicler, who cites it in 1 Chron. 16:23–33, after citing Ps. 105:1–15, in the context of the restored Temple, and the new song in Psalm 96 is now read as a prophecy, that God will come to his people and judge the earth (v. 13).

God's kingdom is always entering history, and Christians have re-read Psalm 96 in the light of another prophecy, now fulfilled: the 'new song' is now the song of the kingdom of God inaugurated through Jesus Christ. Jerome observes in his *Homilies on the Psalms*: 'Sing to the LORD a new song; Who is to sing? Sing to the LORD, all the earth. If this is to refer to the Temple in Jerusalem, O Jew, why is *all the earth* called to praise?'[21] This ethos is

[18] Cited in Bill Goodmann, 'Assured Lament: U2 Sing the Psalms', pp. 15-16, in https://relegere.org/relegere/article/view/483.
[19] Gillingham 2008:207.
[20] Cited in P. Fiddes, 'G.M. Hopkins', *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature* (eds.Lemon, R. *et al.*) Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 563–76, here p. 563.
[21] M. Ewald, (trans.) 1963: *Jerome: Homilies Volume I (1–59 on the Psalms)*. Fathers of the Church 48. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press 1963:109-118.

implicit in several musical arrangements of the psalms, as various as Handel's Chandos Anthem no. 4, 'O Sing unto the Lord a New Song' from 1718;[22] and the more contemporary version by Joseph Gelineau, 'O Sing a New Song to the Lord', which also implies a Christian reading.[23]

Rashi, writing nearly seven centuries after Jerome, but aware of this reading, responds: 'This Psalm refers to the distant future and its end proves this, saying: "that he comes to judge the earth". Everywhere a "new song" refers to the future to come.'[24] In Jewish interpretation this 'new song' can only really be sung at the final act of restoration, when the Messiah comes, and, as in verses 7–10, all nations will acknowledge the God of the Jews.[25]

Psalm 98:1 has also been read very differently by Jews and Christians. *Midrash Tanchuma*, with its teaching on the Torah, speaks of the 'new song' in Psalm 98 as the last of the Ten Songs of Faith - the one to be sung at the end of time.[26] The date of the coming of the Messiah is known only to God (v. 2) but the tradition of the dedication of this psalm by Moses to the tribe of Naphtali, who were content in God's blessing (Deut. 32:34), offers a model of patient faith and hope. This explains its use at *Kabbalat Shabbat*. The thirteenth-century *Parma Psalter* has been influenced by these earlier Jewish liturgical traditions. Its image is set within the first Hebrew word of the psalm: a figure, with his right arm raised, points with his left to a musical stave with five lines and ten square notes. Three hybrids, one to the left, one above and one below, each with open beaks, represent the choir which the figure leads.[27]

As with Psalm 96, Christians have read the 'new song' and the victory of God in verse 1 to be about the reign of Christ. The reference in Ps. 98:3, to all the ends of the earth seeing the salvation of God, allows for the justification of the Gentiles' inclusion within the Christian community. According to the Church Fathers, the 'new song' is 'the church's song to Jesus Christ' – a song for Gentiles as well as Jews.[28] Cassiodorus reads the psalm as celebrating both the first and second coming of Christ.[29] This explains its use in Christmas liturgy, alongside the Gospel reading from John 1:1–14.[30] 'Puer nobis natus est', a Gregorian Chant for Christmas Day, is based on the first verse of this psalm (and Isa. 9:6). [31] James

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[22] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N42nSAaeb9M. Handel's Chandos Anthems were based on Psalms 93, 95, 96, 97, 99 and 103.
[23] See https://hymnary.org/hymn/HS1991/706b.
[24] E. Sherevsky, 'Rashi and Christian Interpretations', *JQR* 61 (1971):76–86.
[25] Feuer 2004: 1186 and 1190, citing Kimḥi ; also A.Cohen, *The Psalms*. Soncino Books of the Bible. London: Soncino Press. Second edition 1992:315.
[26] See Feuer 2004: 1202.
[27] *The Parma Psalter* fol. 139v; see M. Beit-Arie, E. Silver and T. Metzger (eds.),*The Parma Psalter: A Thirteenth-Century Illuminated Hebrew Book of Psalms with a Commentary by Abraham Ibn Ezra.* London: Facsimile Editions Limited, 1996:29–148, here 88.
[28] Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel* 6.6 in *POG* 2:6-7, cited in *Psalms 51–150*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture VIII (ed. Q.F. Wesselschmidt), Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007: 200. See also E. De Solms, 2001: *Bible Chrétienne V. Commentaires : Les Psaumes.* Quebec: Anne Signier, 2001:473 (on Athanasius and Augustine).
[29] See P.G. Walsh, P.G. (trans.), 1990: *Cassiodorus, Volume One: Explanation of the Psalms 1–50*. Ancient Christian Writers 51. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1991:430-31.
[30] See J.M. Neale and R.F. Littledale (eds.), *A Commentary on the Psalms from Primitive and Medieval Writers*. Second edition. 4 Volumes. London: Masters, 1874-79, here Volume 3: 251, which lists a number of other Christian festivals which used this psalm.
[31] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pZR9cK13so .

MacMillan's 'A New Song' assumes a more general Christian theme; it was featured in the BBC Proms in July 2000.[32]

Book Five: Psalms 144 and 149

The 'new song' which is promised in v.9 of *Psalm144* has the most interesting reception of all these six psalms, in the way that ancient legends and myths have been used to re-emphasize its newness. This reception plays upon two key themes: a political theme, stressing the opposition to imperial powers (verses 1–2 and 10–11), and a theological theme, emphasizing the renewal of creation and the restoration of family and community life (verses 12–14). These two themes are reinforced by two tropes: Goliath and the Unicorn.

The LXX adds the superscription 'against Goliath' and so gives this a particular Davidic emphasis. The connection might be due to the imagery of the hands and fingers used for warfare in verse 1 (1 Sam. 17:49), the 'sword' in verse 11 (1 Sam. 17:45, 51), and the imagery of deliverance in 144:6-7. Just as King David took on the Philistine 'giants' threatening the people, so now the people will be given the strength to take on imperial 'giants' of their own day.

Early rabbinic tradition makes much of the Goliath motif, setting the psalm either after David's defeat of Goliath, as in *Midrash Shocher Tov,* or after his victory over his enemies (Abraham ibn Ezra and Radak).[33] The attitude to warfare is to imitate 'servant David': 'In this psalm David expresses the authentic Jewish attitude towards war and warriors… Glory and fame are not for David, because it is God who grants salvation to kings (v.10)….The sword is needed to combat hostile powers, yet it should be deplored. Thus, David desires to compose a new kind of song to God (v.9), not only about muscle and might…'[34] On this account the psalm is often cited in the evening service as an introduction to *Motza'ei Shabbat*, being the first prayer of a new week, teaching that all our efforts at overcoming the 'enemy' are not about us but about God.

Predictably, in Christian reception the warfare is not so much physical as spiritual.[35] Hence Cassiodorus argues that the reference to Goliath in the Greek and Latin headings is a prophecy of Christ's struggle with evil and his victory over death: 'Just as David laid low Goliath by using a rock as the weapon of war, so the power of the devil was overcome by the Rock which is the Lord Jesus Christ'.[36] This re-reading of the 'Goliath' trope is found in several illustrated Psalters, both in the west and the east. The Carolingian *Stuttgart Psalter* (fol. 158v) depicts warriors with swords and shields and David with stones and sling. The heading reads 'Goliath attacking David and David beheading the dead Goliath'.[37] The Byzantine *Hamilton Psalter* (fol. 237v) shows David slinging at Goliath, who is holding his

[32] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwWM8Zth4ns .
[33] Feuer 2004: 1677, citing *Midrash Shocher Tov.*
[34] *Ibid.*, 1677.
[35] De Solms 2001: 665 and 666.
[36] P.G. Walsh (trans.) *Cassiodorus, Volume Three: Explanation of the Psalms 101–150*. Ancient Christian Writers 53. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991:413. This is also found in Ambrose *Exp in Ps* 118.11: see Walsh *ibid.* p. 519.
[37] http://digital.wlb-stuttgart.de/sammlungen/sammlungsliste/werksansicht/?no_cache=1&tx_dlf%5Bid%5D=1343&tx_dlf%5Bpage%5D=324.

sword and shield and surrounded by an army of Philistines. The *Bristol Psalter* (fol. 231v) adds two inscriptions: David is the 'Personification of Might' and Goliath is the 'Personification of Pride'.[38] The same image and inscription are found, more faintly, in the *Theodore Psalter* (fol. 182r).[39]

The Unicorn trope is partly inspired by verses 3-4, which use Pss. 8:4 and 90:5-6 to express themes of human fragility and divine permanence. As the Giant Goliath featured many times in Byzantine Psalters as a symbol of the might of imperial power, so Mythical Unicorn symbolised the power of inner temptation. The Byzantine *Kiev Psalter* actually contains 'The Fable of the Unicorn' (from Archdeacon Spiridon's account) in its margin above Psalm 144, written in a tiny vermilion script, with an image of a unicorn below it.[40] Both the account of the fable and the image are also seen, again faintly, on the damaged manuscript of the *Theodore Psalter* (fol.182v). Here the unicorn is inscribed; under the man are the words 'Personification of Luxury' whilst the tree has the inscription 'Personification of Deceit'.[41] The day mouse and night mouse gnawing under its roots can also be seen, as also the dragon in the pit, inscribed 'Personification of Hell'. The *Barberini Psalter* (fol. 237v) is almost identical in this respect.

Space forbids further references to giants and unicorns in the Psalter, although initially this paper had intended to have this as its main focus. But Psalm 144 is the only place where the two are brought together, and is a fine example of the ways in which the ambiguities in the poetry lend themselves to more mythical as well as metaphorical allusions, thus broadening again the meaning of this 'new song'.

Psalm 149, in Jewish tradition, again interprets the 'new song' as the song of the Messianic age. Yet for Christian commentators such as Augustine, God's praise is no longer found in the synagogues of the Jews (any more than it is in the madness of pagans, or in the errors of heretics or in the applause of theatres): the new song, God's praise, is found *in the church of his saints*[42]. 'The Old Testament is an old song, the New Testament a new song. In the Old Testament are temporal and earthly promises. Whoso loveth earthly things singeth an old song: let him desire to sing a new song, love the things of eternity…' [43] Jerome concurs: the new song is for 'a new people that sings a new song'.[44] This is the sung to be sung to the Lord Jesus Christ for his having built a universal Jerusalem for all peoples (verses 1-2).[45]

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[38] http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_40731_f231v.
[39] http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_19352_f182r.
[40] See N. Toranova and E.L.McGuire, *The Kiev Psalter of 1397: An Analysis*, published online 2003 at https://www.medievalists.net/2009/06/the-kiev-psalter-of-1397-an-analysis/. The Greek version of this fable has been attributed to John of Damascus (675-749) and concerns one of the parables told by St. Barlaam to Ioasaph, a newly converted son of a pagan king. A man tries to escape a unicorn, represented here as a symbol of death, and attempts to climb a tree, an apparent symbol of life, whose branches are laden with honey; betrayed by the seduction of sweetness the man little knows that at the base of the tree, by day and night, a black mouse and white mouse are gnawing at its roots. Soon the tree and the man will fall into the pit as a gaping hole opens up beneath them. The story has links with Genesis 3 and the seduction of the fruit of the tree (in this case, of knowledge, although the tree of life is also present); here the unicorn's role is like that of the serpent's temptation of Adam and Eve.
[41] See http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_19352_f182v
[42] Sermon 34.6 *WSA* 3 2: cited in Wesselschmidt 2007:168.
[43] E. Uyl, E. (trans.) *Saint Augustine*: *Exposition on the Book of Psalms.* Woodstock: Devoted Publishing, 2017: 693.
[44] M. Ewald 1963:424 (Homily 59).
[45] Walsh 1991: 457.

What of the ‘new song’ today? We have seen its various outworkings in the early psalmists, and noted its broader afterlife in the work of the compilers, and seen the very different readings of it, in commentaries, music and art, throughout the centuries. What of today? At the time of writing (in late 2020) religious communities are still working out a *new* understanding of singing in worship as they look to a post lockdown context in the midst of a somewhat fragile ‘new normal’. Psalm 137:4 (‘How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?’) has a poignant relevance, for Covid-19 has forced us to silence our songs, for fear of passing on the virus to others. Covid, like those Babylonian captors, taunts us to sing the songs we long to sing but can no longer do. To date, our instruments are just beginning to be used again as an accompaniment to a song sung by a choir. Yet that new song - whether about the order and beauty in creation, or about individual healing, or about recognising God’s universal sovereignty, or about justice for the poor, or about praise simply for its own sake, as in Psalms 149 and 150 – is ‘forever new’. It will return. And when it does, and when we remove our face masks and sing as never before, we shall appreciate its newness all the more.