

The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

ISSN 1203-1542

new purl address: www.purl.org/jhs



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Volume 3: Article 3 (2001)

Allan K. Jenkins,

Erasmus' Commentary on Psalm 2

ERASMUS' COMMENTARY ON PSALM 2

by

Allan K. Jenkins,

University College, Chichester

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The best known contribution to biblical scholarship of Erasmus of Rotterdam (c.1466-1536 CE) is his edition of the Greek New Testament, first published in 1516. This, with his Latin translation, marked a significant move away from the dominance of the Vulgate to a new emphasis on the original languages of Christian scripture. It represented the flowering of a renewed interest in ancient languages and literature, which originated in Renaissance Italy and made its influence felt across Europe in the opening decades of the sixteenth century.
- 1.2. Erasmus' subsequent revisions of his New Testament and of the *Annotations*, which he published alongside it and continued to edit throughout his life, show his concern for careful philological and grammatical work as the basis for translation and interpretation. Erasmus was not, however, driven simply by the demands of scholarship, but by the conviction that a return to the wellspring of scripture would bring new life to the Church's ritual and worship, and provide the means for personal growth in holiness. He believed that knowledge of scripture should not be restricted to the clergy, but made available to all, if necessary by means of vernacular translations, though he did not himself attempt this.¹ His Greek New Testament was followed between 1517 and 1524 by *Paraphrases* on all the books of the New Testament, except Revelation, which sought to make Scripture more accessible, and which show him at work as an interpreter of the New Testament.
- 1.3. Erasmus' work on the Old Testament was less abundant, and his approach to its interpretation has been subject to less extensive study than his work on the New Testament.² As was fitting for one who as a religious was committed even outside the cloisters to the daily recitation of the breviary offices,³ it was the Psalms that became the focus of Erasmus' attention in the Old Testament. He

deplored those who ‘think that the highest piety resides in this one thing: counting over as many psalms as possible every day although they can scarcely understand them even in a literal sense’,⁴ and sought rather in his own writings to bring out their spiritual meaning. Between 1515 and 1535 he produced works on eleven of the Psalms.⁵ An ‘exposition’ (*enarratio*) of Psalm 1 (1515) was followed by a ‘commentary’ (*commentarius*) on Psalm 2 (1522), a ‘paraphrase’ (*paraphrasis*) of Psalm 3 (1524), and a ‘sermon’ (*concio*) on Psalm 4 (1525),⁶ after which he abandoned the sequential order. The ‘paraphrase’ that he adopted for much of his New Testament interpretation he found to be unsuitable for conveying the affective quality of the psalms, and ultimately he found ‘exposition’ the most satisfactory form.⁷

- 1.4.** In one of his earliest writings *The Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, first published in 1503, Erasmus had strongly advocated the study of Scripture as one of the primary weapons in the armoury of the Christian soldier.⁸ Such study was the basis for the ‘philosophy of Christ’ to which he summons the readers of his New Testament in the *Paraclesis*, one of its Prefaces: ‘that pure and genuine philosophy of Christ is not to be drawn from any source more abundantly than from the evangelical books [that is, the Gospels] and from the Apostolic Letters’.⁹ Such a return to the source, or *ad fontes* approach as it has often been described, was fundamental, because Scripture mediated the very presence of Christ: ‘these writings bring you the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ Himself, and thus they render him so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon Him with your very eyes’.¹⁰ Such a strongly Christocentric view of Scripture, however, raised the question of the place of the Old Testament, and here the Psalms provided Erasmus with his hermeneutical key. Psalm 2 in particular, with its focus on God’s anointed king, he understood as speaking not so much of the Davidic king of the Jews, but of the Christian ‘king’, Jesus Christ. The *Commentary on Psalm 2* is thus of particular interest for Erasmus’ interpretation of the Old Testament. Not only does it demonstrate his approach as a Christian scholar to the Hebrew Scriptures, but it also contains specific discussion of his understanding of the nature of biblical interpretation. It is now available in English translation in the Toronto edition of Erasmus’ *Collected Works*.¹¹

1.5. For Erasmus, interpretation meant the deployment of a sound knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to restore the original texts from errors in copying and bring out the meaning. For the New Testament this was epitomised by the detailed linguistic work that went into his Greek New Testament and the accompanying *Annotations*. He was convinced that such work required good knowledge of Greek as well as Latin. By the same token, interpretation of the Old Testament called for knowledge of Hebrew, and, following Augustine,¹² he advocated at least moderate proficiency in the three languages:

... the first concern must be the thorough learning of the three languages, Latin, Greek and Hebrew, because it is agreed that all the mystery of scripture is made known by them. Dear reader, do not here shy away from me because of the difficulty of the business as if you had been repelled with a club. ... Nor do we demand that you are taken forwards by the miracle of eloquence: it is enough if you progress towards a certain neatness and discrimination, a mean, which suffices for making judgments. For, to disregard all other disciplines, understanding what is written is impossible if we do not know the language in which it is written. For I do not think that these men deserve attention who, while they rot in sophisticated trifles until senility are accustomed to say, 'Jerome's translation is enough for me.' ... what about linguistic peculiarities that cannot be expressed in a different language so as to retain the same light, their native grace and equal emphasis? What about certain things that are too minute for translation (a matter that Jerome constantly proclaims and complains about)? ... I myself now forty-nine return when I can to Hebrew, which I formerly sampled in some fashion: there is nothing which the human mind cannot do if there is the will and the desire.¹³

In his works on the Psalms, Erasmus makes reference to the Latin text in which they would have been most familiar to his readers, to the Greek of the LXX, and to the Hebrew. In practice, however, he never mastered Hebrew,¹⁴ and by the time he came to publish the *Commentary on Psalm 2* in 1522, his attitude towards it was distinctly negative. Referring to Hebrew and Syriac, he writes: 'there is no need to cudgel our brains with the complexities of these barbaric languages!' (p.142). In view of this, the question arises of the way in which Erasmus' *ad fontes* approach manifested itself in his exegesis of the Old Testament. This paper will seek to answer this in relation to the *Commentary on Psalm 2*.

2. Erasmus' sources

2.1. Some years before he turned his attention to Psalm 2, Erasmus set out his approach to the interpretation of Scripture in a further Preface to his New Testament, the *Methodus*. As in the *Paraclesis*, he emphasised that the fundamental aim was not the advancement of academic learning, but the transformation of life: 'Make this one vow to be changed to be seized, to be inspired, to be transformed in those things which you are learning'.¹⁵ Again, he emphasised the need to return *ad fontes*: 'if someone more desires to be instructed in piety than in disputation, he should first and foremost be very well instructed in the sources, and well-versed in those writers who most closely drank from these sources'.¹⁶ By the latter he meant the early Christian commentators, to whom he turned in preference to the logic chopping of the medieval scholastics who sought to conform Scripture to philosophical or doctrinal schemes. If anyone compares the earlier commentators, he wrote:

with these more recent theologians he will there see a golden river flowing but here a meagre rivulet; there they are not only clear, but sparkle at the source, and you will be abundantly satisfied with gardens copiously bearing fruit, but here you will be torn to pieces and tortured among the thorns.¹⁷

Accordingly, Erasmus' interpretations of the Psalms abound with references to the early Christian commentators. There are occasional references to Arnobius (5th C. CE), and Cassiodorus (c.485-c.580 CE), but the most frequent references are to Augustine (354-430 CE), and to Hilary of Poitiers (c.315-367 CE), an edition of whose works Erasmus was to publish in 1523.¹⁸ On points of translation his most frequent recourse was to Jerome (c.342-420 CE), an edition of whose letters and treatises he had published in 1516 as part of a larger work that also included his commentaries. Jerome's linguistic scholarship and knowledge of classical literature was much admired by Erasmus, and he took Jerome's return to the original languages of Scripture as a model for his own endeavours.¹⁹

2.2. As well as commentaries by the early Christian writers, Erasmus also had available for his work on the psalms the Greek text of the Septuagint (LXX), and two Latin translations by Jerome. In the main, the LXX corresponds closely to the Hebrew,²⁰ but there are some significant points of

difference, most, though not all, of which are evident in Jerome's translations. Jerome's 'Gallican Psalter', was a revision of the Old Latin on the basis of the LXX and other Greek versions set out in Origen's *Hexapla*. It derived its name from its popularity in Gaul, where its promotion by Alcuin in the eight century led to its adoption in the Vulgate and the Roman Breviary as the official Roman version. Jerome later produced a translation based directly on the Hebrew, the 'Hebrew Psalter', but the Latin text cited by Erasmus corresponds substantially to that of the 'Gallican Psalter'.²¹

3. Erasmus' use of the Hebrew text

- 3.1. The earliest reference in the *Commentary* to Hebrew comes in the lengthy opening discussion concerning the numbering of the psalm. The reference to it in the Acts of the Apostles as 'the first psalm' (Acts 13:33)²² had also greatly exercised patristic commentators, and in discussing their views Erasmus questions whether it was likely 'that in Hilary's time the psalms were still not numbered and placed in order in the Hebrew version?' (pp.72-73). His discussion is, however, driven not by an interest in the Hebrew as such, but by his unquestioning acceptance that the New Testament was correct in its designation. His own conclusion was that Psalm 1 probably served as a preface to the whole Psalter (pp.74f), though he was not unfavourable towards the view that Psalm 2 was originally continuous with Psalm 1 (pp.73f); both possibilities had been suggested by Jerome.²³
- 3.2. Another reference to Hebrew comes in relation to v.6, in which the LXX rendering differs from it. Erasmus expresses a clear preference for the Hebrew, and understands the speaker here, in accordance with Jerome's translation of 'the original Hebrew', to be God the Father: 'I have enthroned [or 'anointed'] my king on my holy mountain of Zion' (p.69). He comments that 'the Hebrew text is quite straightforward', and sees no need to follow the LXX in seeking to avoid an abrupt change of speaker from the king in vv.5,7a to God in v.6 by rendering the words as: 'But I have been made king by him on his holy mountain of Zion' (pp.118-119).²⁴ He remarks more generally that 'It is not uncommon for the translators of the Septuagint to permit themselves this kind of thing', and cites also their addition of the words 'Lord' and 'righteous' in v.12 (p.119). In v.12, however, his text retains the additions, so that 'perish from the way' of the Hebrew becomes 'perish from the righteous path'.²⁵ In neither v.6 nor v.12 would it have been necessary for Erasmus

to consult the Hebrew itself, since, as he acknowledged in relation to v.6, the changes introduced by the LXX are clear from comparison with Jerome's translation from the Hebrew.

- 3.3.** As well as taking into account the tendencies of the LXX translators, there are a number of places in which Erasmus points out characteristics of Hebrew expression, in particular its imagery and its style, which have a bearing on the way that the psalm should be interpreted. In commenting on the reference to God 'laughing' in v.4, he notes that the human imagery used of God is not to be taken literally:

In the Holy Scriptures, human emotions are frequently attributed to God: fury, anger, regret, joy, grief, pity, although none of these is appropriate to the divine nature, which is utterly immutable; none the less, following the tradition of the mystical Scriptures, words expressing the emotions which result from changes in *our* fortunes are applied to God. (p.102)

Such an appreciation of the concrete nature of Hebrew expression was not however original to Erasmus, but was the subject of comment also by Hilary and Augustine.²⁶

- 3.4.** In relation to Hebrew style, it is interesting that Erasmus was aware of what subsequently, following the work of Robert Lowth in 1753,²⁷ came to be known as 'parallelism'. Lowth is usually claimed as the first scholar to have explained Hebrew poetic structure in terms of parallelism of expression, but, although Erasmus does not directly discuss the nature of Hebrew poetry, he in effect describes poetic parallelism as a rhetorical device. In v.1: 'Why did the nations rage, and the peoples carry through their futile plots?',²⁸ he argues that both halves of the verse refer to the same group of people, namely, 'the people of Israel', and he makes a similar observation in relation to the terms 'kings' and 'leaders' in v.2, which together he understands to make a single statement about Herod and Pilate. He writes that 'it is well known that this technique is very common in the prophetic writings, when the idea conveyed in the first part of the verse is repeated in the second part in different words, or else is reinforced by a similar idea, or is answered by a contrasting one' (p.86).²⁹ For Erasmus, understanding this technique provided a control for interpretation, and meant that two parts of a parallel construction could not be taken in isolation and interpreted separately from each other. While Erasmus acknowledged his indebtedness to Augustine for this insight into the nature of the Hebrew language, he went beyond Augustine in his application of it to Psalm 2.³⁰

3.5. Verse 6, also provides an example of Erasmus commenting a particular Hebrew word. His interpretation is based on the etymology of ‘Zion’ which he notes in Hebrew means ‘a watch tower’ (p.119). In this case there is no difference between the Hebrew and the LXX (both use the proper name), and Erasmus’ reason for bringing in what he supposed to be the meaning of the Hebrew name is to move from the literal sense to the mystical: ‘On the literal level, this verse is appropriate enough to David, who defeated the Jebusites and build his palace on Zion (that is, the citadel of Jerusalem), but let us dismiss such insipid, watered-down interpretation, a product of the “letter which kills”’ (p.119). For Erasmus as a ‘watchtower’ Zion ‘symbolizes ... the mountain of the gospel teaching, from which we look down on whatever the world considers exalted ...’ (pp.119-120). For Jerome, as for Augustine, Zion symbolized the Church, and Erasmus’ interpretation shows, like his discussion of the numbering of the psalm, that his indebtedness to patristic commentators did not prevent him from fashioning his own views. Again, however, Erasmus’ reference to Hebrew was derivative; the explanation of Zion as *specula*, ‘watch tower’ is well attested in Jerome.³¹ Similarly when he linked Zion to Jerusalem, and commented that Jerusalem in Hebrew means ‘a vision of peace’ (p.121),³² he would not have needed direct knowledge of Hebrew to make the connection between ‘Salem’ and ‘peace’, since he would have known this from Hebrews 7:1-2.

3.6. A further example of Erasmus’ reference to the meaning of a particular Hebrew word comes in his comment on the opening phrase of v.12 (where the LXX and the Hebrew have different renderings). He notes that Jerome points out that **נִשְׁקוּ בָר** is ambiguous and could be rendered either ‘worship (literally, ‘kiss’) the son’ or ‘worship in purity’.³³ He then explains the difference between the two possible translations by pointing out that the word *bar* usually meant ‘son’ in Syriac, but in Hebrew meant ‘in purity’. Again, Erasmus makes it clear that his access to the Hebrew was derivative from Jerome. He adds that ‘according to some’ *bar* also meant ‘wheat’ (p.142), an item of philological knowledge that is wholly irrelevant in this context, but found also in Jerome.³⁴ As a translator, Jerome was obliged to make a choice between the two possibilities and, following Aquila and Symmachus, he opted for *adore pure* (‘worship in purity’), so that Jews could have no grounds for

criticism.³⁵ Erasmus, however, in his interpretation, combined both meanings and applied the verse to those who ‘do not worship the Son in purity’, among them Jews and ‘those who attribute salvation to man’s own works’ (p.142). This double interpretation shows that Erasmus was not so much concerned to establish the original meaning, but to press every interpretative possibility into the service of Christian appropriation and contemporary application.

3.7. In the instances so far considered Erasmus’ references to the Hebrew text are derivative from Hebrew scholars, especially Jerome. Conversely, when comparison of Jerome’s Psalters from the LXX and from the Hebrew shows up no variation, Erasmus follows Jerome without question. Thus in v.9 the same Hebrew consonantal text **רָעַע** is understood by MT to derive from **רָעַע** ‘to break’, but by the LXX to be from **רָעַה** ‘to shepherd’, a metaphor for ‘to rule’. Such a confusion of two forms was understandable in the case of the LXX and early Christian writers, since they were dealing with an unpointed text, but by the time of the *Commentary* printed editions of the Hebrew text with vowel points were available. Among these was the first Rabbinic Bible, published by Bomberg of Venice in 1516/17, and a Hebrew edition of the Psalms produced by Wolfgang Capito (a follower of Erasmus) and others in 1516.³⁶ Erasmus had evidently not consulted a Hebrew text with vowel points, but simply followed Jerome’s ‘you shall rule them’ (*reges eos*). Further, even though ‘you shall break them ...’ (v.9a) gives a better parallel to ‘you shall shatter them ...’ (v.9b), Erasmus does not pick this up as he does in a number of other verses. His approach is governed rather by the difficulty he had with the idea of God acting in such a harsh and violent way. He bases his comment on the fact that the Greek ποιμαίνει means ‘you shall tend, or guide, like a shepherd’ (p.132), an image which evokes Christ the Good Shepherd as a model of leadership. He cites Hilary in support of this understanding, but also notes that ‘according to experts in the language, the Hebrew word has similar overtones’ (p.132).

3.8. Although in the *Commentary* Erasmus makes a number of references to the ‘true Hebrew’, a phrase that he took over from Jerome, he makes it clear that his knowledge of this is dependent upon others. Sometimes his acknowledgement is in general terms, such as ‘students of Hebrew culture tell us ...’ (p.101), or ‘according to experts ...’ (p.132), but more often than not he bases what he writes

on the work of Jerome.³⁷ Not only is there little, if any, evidence for Erasmus' consulting the Hebrew text itself, but, as has already been noted, he also expressed strong aversion to the language. This negative attitude probably stemmed in part from the lack of scholarly literature in ancient Hebrew comparable to the good learning of classical Greek and Latin literature. In comparison with the latter, the Old Testament could seem positively crude - full of superstition, cruelty and fables,³⁸ and using misleading human imagery of God. The *Commentary* also shows his attitude towards it to have been coloured historically by the Jews' rejection of Jesus and what Erasmus saw as their responsibility for his death, and, theologically, by the New Testament rejection of the Jewish law, from the insufferable burden of which Christ had set free those who believed in him.³⁹ Erasmus also had a low opinion of Jewish commentary on the Old Testament, such as that of Rabbi Solomon, as 'pretty well stuffed with vapourings and old wives' tales' (p.80).

4. Erasmus' use of the Greek text

4.1. Despite his references to 'the meaning of the original Hebrew', in some places Erasmus nevertheless bases his interpretation on the Greek. He sometimes dwells on the significance of the choice by the LXX of a particular Greek word rather than others that were available, and in a few places his interpretation was dependent upon the LXX and could not be sustained from the Hebrew. His use of the LXX shows that he was much more at home in Greek than he was in Hebrew.⁴⁰ Three examples may be given of his expertise in Greek, all showing how he takes careful account of the particular words used by the LXX.⁴¹

4.2. The first example comes in Erasmus' comment on v. 5:

Tunc loquetur ad eos in ira sua et in furore suo conturbatit eos.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and in his fury he will confound them.
(p.69)

He notes that in the LXX the Latin *furor*, 'fury', is translated by θυμός, 'which in Greek sometimes means simply "the spirit" and sometimes "a disturbance of the spirit" when it has been violently upset', rather than by μανία, 'which describes people who are ill and in their not right mind' (p.112). He does not, however, develop this nuance in his interpretation. Instead, he notes that there

is little difference in Hebrew between ‘wrath’ and ‘fury’, so that the same idea is repeated in both halves of the verse, and goes on to discuss how the ‘wrath and fury’ of God is manifested.

4.3. The second example occurs in v.10:

Et nunc, reges, intelligite; erudimini qui iudicatis terram.

And now, you kings, understand; learn your lesson, you judges of the earth.

(p.69).

Erasmus’ comment on ‘learn your lesson (*erudimini*)’,⁴² is based on the Greek παιδεύθητε (‘be instructed’) ‘which often refers to moral improvement rather than scholarship, since it comes from the Greek for “children”, whom we bring to heel by the use of strict discipline’. He goes on to expound the phrase in terms of ‘control of the emotions’, and asks ‘How can a man properly rule others, if he is himself subject to blind emotion?’. Again, he notes Augustine’s view that the verse repeats the same idea in different words: ‘that the same people are addressed first as kings and then as judges, and that the same group are first told to understand and then commanded to learn their lesson’, and wishes that ‘our own princes’ would take heed (p.138). In this instance, therefore, his application of the parallelism is nuanced by his understanding of the Greek. While the Greek is close to the underlying Hebrew וְהִנְדַּבְרָה (‘be warned’, RSV),⁴³ the latter carries a greater sense of ‘correction’ or ‘chastening’ and is less easy to apply in the active sense of taking control of oneself.

4.4. The third example comes in v.12a, where Erasmus, following the Gallican Psalter has:

Apprehendite disciplinam ... (p.69) *Grasp this instruction ...* (p.70)

His comment on is based on the LXX’s rendering by the verb δρόξασθε, meaning ‘run after a fugitive’, rather than the less graphic καταλαμβάνετε ‘lay hold of’: ‘They [rulers] must thus act quickly, putting aside all other business to learn this lesson’ (p.140). This is a nuance that depends entirely upon the Greek, and is not evident from the Latin. In this case, the LXX rendering is different from the MT (either ‘worship (or ‘kiss’) the son’ or ‘worship in purity’),⁴⁴ and after applying the Greek to kings and leaders who should be guided by the teachings of scripture (p.141), Erasmus goes on to add further exposition based on the Hebrew.

4.5. It is clear from these examples that, when working with the Greek, Erasmus was able to discern the meaning of the text more precisely than he was from the Hebrew, as well as to bring out shades of meaning which were not evident from the Latin. The status that Erasmus accorded to the LXX is

evident from the way that he sometimes based his exposition solely upon it. Towards the beginning of the *Commentary* (pp.75-76), for example, he makes reference to the ‘true Hebrew’, but does not follow it. In a discussion of the various headings of the psalms he notes that Jerome renders the Greek εἰς τέλος as ‘toward an end’ (*ad finem*), but that he translated ‘the true Hebrew text’ as ‘to the victor’ (*victori*), though Erasmus does not cite the Hebrew itself.⁴⁵ Yet Erasmus’ own exposition is based not on the Hebrew, but on the LXX: ‘Since everything else leads up to an end, and it is not possible to go beyond it, the reader is alerted by this heading to clear his mind ... to receive some notable and flawless concept of the sublime’ (p.75). It is a prime example of how Erasmus’ interpretation is governed by his desire to bring out the spiritual meaning, and it is a signal of the approach that was to govern his interpretation of Ps. 2 as a whole, even though it lacked such a heading itself.

4.6. Erasmus’ attitude towards the LXX was thus ambivalent. Following Hilary, Erasmus seems prepared to grant that the translators of the LXX had privileged knowledge of the mysteries of the Law handed down by Moses (pp.72-73), so that their authority should be respected. On the other hand, he notes that Jerome sometimes overruled them on the basis of the Hebrew, and also that ‘the versions in general use today in the Catholic church differ on many points from their version’ (p.72). In practice, in keeping with the long tradition of the church he accorded the LXX substantial authority, particularly when its readings were embodied in the exegesis of the early Christian writers, to the point where he sometimes based his own interpretation exclusively on the LXX, and sometimes, where it differed from the Hebrew, on both.

4.7. To what extent, then, might Erasmus’ approach to Psalm 2 be deemed to be *ad fontes*? The answer is complex, and clearly does not simply mean interpretation on the basis of the ‘true Hebrew’.

5. Conclusions

5.1. First, it should not be overlooked that interpreting the psalms on the basis of the Hebrew and Greek texts rather than the Latin of the Vulgate itself represented a radical departure for which Erasmus was not without his critics.⁴⁶ His *ad fontes* approach meant getting behind the Latin of the Vulgate

(Gallican) Psalter to the Greek on which it was based, and, so far as it was possible for him, to the original Hebrew.

5.2. Second, where there is no disparity between the LXX and the Hebrew, Erasmus treats the Hebrew as primary, even though he was dependent upon other scholars, mainly Jerome, for his knowledge of it. He explains its imagery, lets his interpretation be controlled by parallelism of structure where he identifies it, and draws upon the etymology of particular Hebrew words. Where there is ambiguity in the Hebrew, as in v.12, he does not seek to resolve it in terms of the original meaning, but incorporates both possibilities into his exposition. His comment on Zion in v. 6 shows that for him the literal or historical sense is unimportant, and the etymology is used a springboard for Christian application. More fundamentally, the reference to the (Davidic) king as ‘anointed’ provided a key for the application of the psalm to Christ, and its application to Jesus in the New Testament (Acts 4:25ff, 13:32-33) provided an authoritative basis for this. Although he demonstrates that he was capable of interpreting the psalm in terms of its context in ancient Israel, his lack of interest in this, fed by his antipathy towards the Jews,⁴⁷ meant that in effect, for Erasmus, the Christological interpretation of the psalm was its historical sense, and this is seen in the way that his exposition is well grounded in the historical circumstances of Christ’s death. Thus what would traditionally have been considered allegorical interpretation of the psalm in applying it to Christ becomes in effect its literal sense. *Ad fontes* meant reading the psalm not in relation to its historical context in the time of David, but in relation to Jesus Christ.

5.3. Third, where there are significant differences between the Hebrew and the LXX, Erasmus was able to identify instances where these were due to deliberate changes by the LXX translators, either to ease a difficulty, as in v. 6, or by way of interpretative expansions, as in v.12. Although he expresses preference for the original Hebrew in v.6, he does not however reject the LXX additions to v.12. When in v.9 the LXX understands the Hebrew consonantal text differently from the MT, Erasmus does not pick this up, as he could have done if he had consulted a pointed text but, like Jerome, he follows the LXX reading. In v.12, where the LXX varies from the Hebrew consonantal text, Erasmus develops interpretations based on both. The LXX, then, is not used as a tool for reconstructing the psalmist’s original text and meaning, but is accorded its own authority. *Ad fontes*

interpretation of Psalm 2 did not mean interpretation based exclusively on the original Hebrew, but more often on both the Hebrew and the LXX.

5.4. The examples considered of Erasmus' use of the Hebrew and LXX texts of Psalm 2 show that both served as launch pads into the spiritual or mystical meaning by which Erasmus was able to apply the psalm to Christ and the Church, and to the circumstances of his own day. In v. 12, for instance, where the Hebrew *bar* is ambiguous, Erasmus does not commit himself either to 'worship the Son' or 'worship in purity', but combines them into 'worship the Son in purity', with *bar* given a double translation as 'Son' and 'in purity'. The reference to the Son secured the Christian appropriation of the psalm, while worship 'in purity' served a contemporary polemic purpose against the Jews and others who rely on 'works' for salvation. By means of evocative pictures of the patient response of Christ to the plots of the religious and political leaders against him, Erasmus' interpretation is aimed at commending the imitation of Christ in personal discipleship, and calling upon the leaders of church and state to rule with the same pastoral concern and gentleness as the Good Shepherd. With the focus on Christ, *ad fontes* meant interpreting the psalm in accordance with 'the Christian philosophy' he was advocating for his own time.⁴⁸

5.5. The way that Erasmus could produce multiple interpretations, based on both the Greek and Hebrew, shows that he was not driven to reconstruct an 'original' text as the basis for interpretation in the manner of modern historical critical scholars, but, like Augustine, regarded multiple meanings as permissible. This was not surprising, given that he was steeped through his study of the early Christian writers in an interpretative tradition that put the emphasis more on the spiritual meaning than on the literal. In consequence, the claim that in his attention to philological detail Erasmus stood at the threshold of modern historical criticism,⁴⁹ needs to be modified in respect of Psalm 2 insofar as philological discussion served an almost exclusively interpretative purpose. Where Erasmus differed from later historical criticism was in his concern for the integration of exegesis with what today would be called 'application' or 'exposition', and bracketed out of the critical work of the 'Academy' as the sole concern of the Church. His over-riding concern was with releasing the power of Scripture to nourish, renew and transform the life of the Christian, of the Church and of society, and to this end he made good use of the rhetorical tradition in which he stood - another

feature which marked him off from modern scholarship.⁵⁰ For Erasmus, scholarly debate had its place, but it was a barren exercise in comparison with interpretation founded upon the Bible's mediation of the presence of Christ, who in Scripture 'still lives and breathes for us and acts and speaks with more immediate efficacy ... than in any other way'.⁵¹

5.6. In relation to its genre, 'commentary' does not therefore seem the best term to describe Erasmus work on Psalm 2. It conforms neither to the modern understanding, nor to that of the sixteenth century when commentary meant in effect 'a discontinuous narrative, elucidating philological and theological interests', and had 'an academic ring about it'.⁵² Erasmus' lengthy interpretation of Psalm 2 (which extends in translation to 76 printed pages) does not overall have the 'academic ring' associated with such writing, and its philological and theological concerns are not directed towards elucidating the psalm in relation to its historical context, but serve rather as a springboard for lengthy applications to the life of the Christian believer and the Church. It might therefore better be described as *enarratio*, that is, displaying 'a homiletic style, one designed to convey the significance and force of a scriptural passage to a small, clearly defined congregation'.⁵³ That the grammatical or literal sense was subservient to Erasmus' commitment to elucidating the contemporary spiritual significance and force of the psalm is clear not only from the examples discussed, but also from his explicit discussion in the *Commentary* of his approach to interpretation,⁵⁴ and from the way that he puts it into effect in what has been described as 'probably the most detailed allegorical exposition of the psalm ever made'.⁵⁵

5.7. Finally, it may be noted that most features of Erasmus' approach to the interpretation of Psalm 2 were not new, but were already to be found in the *Quincuplex Psalterium* (Paris, 1509) of his French contemporary, the biblical humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples.⁵⁶ He, too, saw Christ as the centre and key to the Psalter, rejected the historical sense as uninteresting and as making 'David a historian instead of a prophet'. Instead he transferred the historical sense to the spiritual sense: 'Let us call the literal sense that which is in accord with the Spirit',⁵⁷ that is, the application to Christ, and he gave as an example of the 'proper literal sense' the use of Psalm 2 in Acts 4:25-6 to describe the opposition of Herod and Pilate to Christ.⁵⁸ Lefèvre also displayed philological scholarship, setting out side-by-side the three versions of Jerome, the Old Latin as reconstructed from Augustine's

expositions, and a Latin text corrected from Jerome's Hebrew Psalter. He nevertheless followed the 'true Hebrew' only when it accorded with Christological interpretation. His application of the psalm bore the hallmark of the same spirituality of the *imitatio Christi* that marks Erasmus' *Commentary*, and he also displayed the desire to put the spiritual heart back into the Church's ritual, liturgy, and daily recitation of the psalms which they both owed to the *Devotio Moderna*.⁵⁹ Erasmus was certainly familiar with Lefèvre's New Testament commentaries,⁶⁰ but there is no direct evidence of his knowledge of his work on the Psalms. Dominic Baker-Smith suggests that 'we can with a fair degree of confidence suppose Erasmus to have studied it',⁶¹ but to pursue the issue thoroughly would take us beyond the confines of the present study.

6. Notes

¹ Cf. Erasmus, *Paraclesis*, cited in what follows from the translation in John C. Olin (ed.), *Christian Humanism and the Reformation. Selected Writings of Erasmus* (New York: Fordham U.P.; 3rd.ed. 1987), pp. 97-108.

² For his New Testament scholarship see John William Aldridge, *The Hermeneutics of Erasmus* (Basel Studies in Theology, No. 2; Evz-Vorlage Zurich/John Knox, 1966); Albert Rabil, Jr., *Erasmus and the New Testament* (San Antonio: Trinity UP, 1972); Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ* (Princeton U.P., 1983), Chapter 4, pp.112-193. For his interpretation of the Psalms, cf. Charles Béné, 'L'exégèse des Psaumes chez Erasme', pp. 118-132 in Olivier Fatio & Pierre Fraenkel (eds.), *Histoire de l'exégèse au XVIe siècle* (Libraire Droz, Geneva, 1978); Dominic Baker-Smith, 'Introduction', pp. xiii-lxxii in Dominic Baker-Smith (ed.), *Collected Works of Erasmus, Vol. 63 Expositions of the Psalms* (trans. Michael J. Heath; University of Toronto Press, 1997) [=CWE63].

³ Cf. Dominic Baker-Smith, CWE63, 'Introduction' p.xix.

⁴ *Enchiridion Milites Christiani* (1503); cf. pp. 303-307 of the translation in Matthew Spinka (ed.), *Advocates of Reform* (SCM Press, 1953).

⁵ Commentary: Ps. 2; expositions: Pss. 1, 22 [23], 33, [34], 38 [39]; treatises (titled commentaries): 14 [15], 28 [29], 83 [84]; sermons: 4, 85 [86]; paraphrase: Ps. 3. [Numbers in brackets are those of the Hebrew text].

⁶ All translated in CWE63.

⁷ Dominic Baker-Smith, CWE63, 'Introduction', pp.xviff. On the variety of forms, see also Béné, pp.122f.

⁸ *Enchiridion*, Spinka, pp.306ff.

⁹ *Paraclesis*, Olin, p.105.

¹⁰ The concluding words of the *Paraclesis*, Olin, p.108.

¹¹ Desiderius Erasmus, *Commentarius in psalmum 2, 'Quare fremere gentes?'* ET: 'A Commentary on the Second Psalm, "Why did the nations rage?"', in CWE63, pp. 65-153. Page numbers in the text are to this volume.

¹² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book II, Ch. 11.

¹³ Erasmus, *Methodus*, ll.46ff; private translation from the text printed (with French translation) in Y. Delègue, (ed.), *Érasme. Les Préfaces au Novum Testamentum (1516)* (Geneva, 1990), pp.91-

123. The *Methodus* was later expanded into the *Ratio seu methodus compendio parveniendi ad veram theologiam*, a summary of which is given in Manfred Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology. The Hermeneutic of Erasmus* (University of Toronto Press; 1994), pp.32-39.

¹⁴ Cf. Basil Hall, 'Erasmus: Biblical Scholar and Reformer' pp. 81-113 in T. A. Dorey (ed.) *Erasmus* (RKP, 1970), pp.92ff; reprinted in Basil Hall, *Humanists and Protestants* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), pp.52-85; Dominic Baker-Smith, CWE63, 'Introduction', pp.xlviiff.

¹⁵ Erasmus, *Methodus*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ For Erasmus' editions of patristic works, cf. Fr Louis Bouyer, 'Erasmus in relation to the medieval biblical tradition' pp. 492-505 in G.W.H. Lampe (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 2 (CUP, 1969), p. 499f.

¹⁹ Cf. Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters* (Princeton U.P., 1993), Ch.2. For Erasmus' respect for Jerome's linguistic scholarship, cf. Eugene F. Rice, Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance* (John Hopkins U.P.1988), pp.116ff.

²⁰ Cf. F.W. Mozley, *The Psalter of the Church. The Septuagint Psalms compared with the Hebrew* (CUP, 1905), pp.4-5.

²¹ It is probable that Erasmus also had access to an earlier, more conservative, Latin revision, the 'Roman Psalter', but whether the text that survives is actually that of Jerome is disputed; cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome* (Duckworth, 1975), p.89. For details of the texts and editions available to Erasmus, cf. Dominic Baker-Smith, CWE63, 'Introduction', pp.xxiff. Modern editions of the 'Gallican' and 'Hebrew' Psalters are conveniently set out in parallel in the German Bible Society edition of the Vulgate: *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatem Versionem* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart; 3rd. ed. 1983). The Latin text used by Erasmus as reconstructed by Michael J. Heath is printed in CWE63, p.69, together with an English translation.

²² Most modern translations follow an alternative manuscript tradition, which reads 'second'.

²³ For other 16th century views on this question, cf. R. Gerald Hobbs, '*Hebraica Veritas and Traditio Apostolica*. Saint Paul and the Interpretation of the Psalms in the Sixteenth Century', pp.83-99 in David C. Steinmetz (ed.), *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century* (Duke U.P., 1990), pp.90ff.

²⁴ Cf. Vulgate Psalter *Iuxta Septuaginta: ego autem constitutus sum rex ab eo*; Vulgate Psalter *Iuxta Hebraicum: ego autem orditus sum regem meum*. Erasmus: *ego ordinavi regem meum*.

²⁵ The translation of M. J. Heath, CWE63, p.70. Cf. Vulgate Psalter *Iuxta Hebraicum: pereatis de via*; Erasmus: *pereatis de via iusta* = Psalter *Iuxta Septuaginta*.

²⁶ Cf. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos, ad. loc.*

²⁷ Robert Lowth, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum Praelectiones Academicae* (1753; ET 1793).

²⁸ The translation is that of CWE63, p.69.

²⁹ Heath, CWE63, p.86, n.61, notes that a similar point is made in Erasmus' exposition of Ps. 1.

³⁰ Erasmus also finds it in v.4 (p.101), v.5 (p.112), v.10 (p.138) - all instances of what since Lowth has been termed 'synonymous parallelism'; he cites Luke 1:53 as an example of 'antithesis' (p.86).

³¹ E.g. *Liber Interpretationis Hebraicorum Nominum* (CCSL, 72 I.1), pp.108, 112, 122, etc. A link between 'Zion' and 'seeing, beholding, or contemplation' is also pointed out by Augustine, Jerome and Hilary; cf. Michael J. Heath, CWE63, p.120, n.237. Augustine does not actually have 'watch-tower' as Heath seems to suggest, but *speculationem* 'contemplation', used also by Hilary in Ps.68:31; cf. Alexander Souter, *A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A.D.* (Oxford, 1949).

³² The explanation 'vision of peace' perhaps comes from the identification of the location of Mount Moriah as Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 3:1). Jerome notes that in Gen. 22:2 Symmachus rendered 'the land of Moriah' as 'the land of the vision'; cf. Adam Kamesar, *Jerome, Greek Scholarship and the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford, 1993), pp.188ff; C.T.R. Hayward, *Jerome's Hebrew Questions on Genesis* (Oxford, 1995), p.55.

³³ Many modern commentators and translators have sought to avoid the difficulty of the use of an Aramaic loanword for 'son' by emendation; cf. BHS, RSV, NRSV 'kiss his feet'. 'Kiss the Son'

was adopted by KJV and is defended by Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Word Biblical Commentary, 19; Waco, 1983), p.64.

³⁴ Jerome, *Apology against Rufinus*, I.19.

³⁵ Cf. Jerome, *Apology against Rufinus*, I.19 where Jerome defends himself against the charge of inconsistency for using 'worship the son' (*adorate filium*) in his commentary.

³⁶ E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (SCM Press, 1980), pp.37f, 172. The Complutensian Polyglot which contained the New Testament in Greek and Latin, and the Old Testament in a pointed Hebrew text, Greek and Latin was begun in Spain in 1502 under the auspices of Cardinal Ximenes, but not published until 1522, the same year as Erasmus published his *Commentary on Psalm 2*. Erasmus had refused an invitation to participate in the production of the Polyglot, believing there to be too many Jews in Spain; cf. Basil Hall, *Humanists and Protestants* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), p.19.

³⁷ Cf. Béné, p.124f.

³⁸ Cf. Aldridge, p.49.

³⁹ Cf. CWE63, pp.117f, 131. For Erasmus' anti-Judaism, cf. Heiko A. Obermann, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation* (trans. J.I. Porter; Fortress, 1984), pp.38-40; *The Impact of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), pp.102-106. Hilmer M. Pabel, 'Erasmus of Rotterdam and Judaism. A Reexamination in the light of new evidence' in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 87 (1996), pp. 9-37, argues that it was theologically based.

⁴⁰ For Erasmus' mastery of Greek, cf. W. Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation* (CUP, 1955), pp.120ff.

⁴¹ The Latin text and English translation are those of CWE63, pp. 69-70.

⁴² The form is, in fact, passive, as is the Greek and Hebrew (Niph'al).

⁴³ *Contra* BHS, which on the basis of a few MSS suggests that the LXX read קָרַב. Unlike קָרַב, this verb is never in the LXX translated by παίδεύω; cf. Takamitsu Muraoka, *Hebrew/Aramaic Index to the Septuagint* (Baker Books, 1998), *ad. loc.*

⁴⁴ Mozley, p. 5, explains it as 'kiss paraphrased by a simpler figure'.

⁴⁵ קָרַב translated in the KJV as 'to the chief musician'; cf. RSV: 'to the choirmaster'.

⁴⁶ Cf. Erica Rummel, *Erasmus and His Catholic Critics*, I: 1515-1522 (Nieuwkoop, De Graff, 1989)

⁴⁷ For the widespread Christian rejection in the sixteenth century of the literal sense as 'Judaizing', see Hobbs, p. 96.

⁴⁸ Cf. Aldridge, p. 127.

⁴⁹ E.g., Aldridge, pp. 127f.; Bentley, p. 193.

⁵⁰ Cf. Hoffmann, pp. 4f. 89ff.

⁵¹ Dedication of his New Testament to Leo X, as cited by Dominic Baker-Smith, CWE63, 'Introduction', pp. xxiii.

⁵² Cf. Dominic Baker-Smith, CWE63, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

⁵³ Dominic Baker-Smith, CWE63, 'Introduction', p. xvii.

⁵⁴ Pp. 78-80, 144-46.

⁵⁵ Michael J. Heath, CWE63, p. 67.

⁵⁶ Cf. Guy Bedouelle, 'La Lecture Christologique du Psautier dans le *Quincuplex Psalterium* de Lefèvre d'Étaples' pp. 133-43 in Olivier Fatio and Pierre Fraenkel (eds.), *Histoire de l'exégèse au XVIe siècle* (Librairie Droz, Geneva, 1978); *Le Quincuplex Psalterium de Lefèvre d'Étaples. Un guide de lecture* (Librairie Droz, Geneva, 1979).

⁵⁷ As translated by Hobbs, p. 96.

⁵⁸ Dominic Baker-Smith, CWE63, p. xxiv. For a summary of Lefèvre's approach, cf. pp. xxiii-xxvii.

⁵⁹ On the *Devotio Moderna* see, for example, Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus* (Collins, Fontana, 1972), pp. 20 ff.

⁶⁰ For a description of their disagreement over the interpretation of Ps. 8 in Hebrews 2:7, see Bainton, pp. 171 ff.

⁶¹ CWE63, p.xxiii.