

Caught in the Crosshairs: A Study of Psalm 2

Colleagues,

Cleaning up the files I came across this long-lost treasure from 3 years ago. It's Jerry Burce's signature crossing of folks like us back in 2002-though in one place he's updated a reference to 2005-with the diagnosis and prognosis of Psalm 2. Using texts from the Hebrew scriptures for Christian crossings takes extra work. You don't see OT-crossings often even on Crossings' own text study postings. In earlier days when Crossings offered semester-long courses, we did have a couple based on OT texts—from Isaiah and from the Psalms. So there is a tradition. As you will see, Jerry can do it—take an OT text and run it through the Crossings matrix. The trick is to necessitate Christ just as the original NT writers did when working from the Hebrew scriptures, the only Bible they had.

During a regular workweek Jerome Burce exercises his calling as pastor at Messiah Lutheran congregation in Fairview Park, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. For this Crossings from Psalm 2 Jerry was guest-worker at the "Sebring Seminar," a regular gathering in Florida during the past decade engineered by Richard Lyon and coached by Bob Bertram, both now among the blessed departed.

We rejoice that Jerry is among the living and we know that you will rejoice too with what he gives us here.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

CAUGHT IN THE CROSSHAIRS. A STUDY OF PSALM 2

[Preface to the 2002 Sebring Seminar. The overall theme for the seminar was Prov. 1:7, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." I picked it. I was toying at the time with ideas for a book on deus absconditus (God hidden). These were the months after 9/11 when no one was bothering to be as scared as we ought to be. We still aren't. –Jerry]

PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS [to the Sebring Seminar participants in 2002]

- i. Our goals over these next twenty four hours are two: first, to explore and discuss the proverb that serves as our theme; second, to go home wiser than we were when we came.*
- ii. The first goal will entail the exercise of our minds. The second proposes an outcome in our hearts. Toward the first goal we will work. Toward the second let us pray.*
- iii. The theme presupposes our participation in a culture that is very smart but not very wise. It also assumes that we ourselves are prone to foolishness. One of our big jobs is to be as mutually honest about this as possible, bearing in mind that understatement is not the only form of dishonesty. So is exaggeration.*
- iv. We will want to keep in mind throughout our time together that "the fear of the Lord" is a sharper, more specific expression than "the fear of God." Wisdom, says the proverb, begins with fear not of any old god or of "godness" in general, but of that distinct and particular God who revealed his Word and will at Sinai and also—so the Church observes—in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Let us agree from the outset that when we say "God" we*

mean this God and not another.

- v. The fact that an ELCA pastor should feel obliged to make the previous observation is a good indicator of how fearless, and therefore foolish, the Church is getting, at least in its mainline quarters. It also underlines why the theme merits a seminar's worth of attention.*
- vi. St. Paul asserts that "God made [Christ Jesus] our wisdom" (1 Cor 1:30). By overlaying the proverb with this assertion we arrive at the ultimate goal of our time together. Our aim is to grasp—again, with mind and heart—how the fearsomeness of the Lord is the essential presupposition of Christ's ministry, and also how the fear of the Lord is the essential precondition of faith in Christ. Our aim, in other words, is to "necessitate" Christ. God grant this outcome. Amen.*
- vii. Finally: let us agree from the outset that whenever, as in the previous paragraph, we speak of Christ's ministry, we are speaking primarily of his present ministry to us, among us, and through us, for the sake of the world. I assume it is truly said of all present that this folly (so say the Greeks) is consuming our lives. Like Paul we are fools for Christ. Why else would we be here? May the coming hours encourage us to keep wearing this label with joy.*

PSALM 2

- 1. Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain [KJV"imagine a vain thing]?*
- 2. The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed, saying,*
- 3. "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us."*

4. *He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision.*
 5. *Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying*
 6. *“I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.”*
 7. *I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.*
 8. *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.*
 9. *You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”*
 10. *Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.*
 11. *Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling*
 12. *kiss his feet, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (RSV)*
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SUMMARY

For people like us-thoughtful American Christians of AD 2002, deeply earnest, striving mightily to honor and serve God-Psalm 2 functions as a trap. God himself is the hunter who has cleverly laid it. He now waits for us to stumble into it. He will use it to expose the hypocrisy of our superficial reverence for him, and with it the folly of imagining that our pious feelings for him are enough to save us. Once he has us trapped, he will strangely yet graciously invite us to hang our hearts and hopes on Jesus his anointed (which means Christ).

THE SET-UP

1. *For any American who has learned to read the Bible properly, Psalm 2 will quickly come across as an incredibly annoying little poem. One might go so far as*

to call it a Biblical embarrassment.

1. In case you were wondering, Virginia, the scholars are quite correct. The Bible is not properly read until we've scraped away the gauzy filters and smoky sediments of pious Sunday School impressions, fixed and reinforced by a long and deep tradition of deceptive Christian art. "Read what's there," said Luther. The better exegetes of the past 150 years have been pushing us hard to do just that. Surprises abound when we do it. The Jacob of Genesis is not the fellow we saw in the Sunday School leaflets; and back then if anyone dared to tell us the truth about David, we were too young to get it. Later, when we grew up, too many of us struggled far too long with a second, ideological filter, a vague, uneasy impression of what we were supposed to be finding in a book called holy.
2. Among things we were not supposed to find in such a book were passages that provoke our contempt. Many of us, encountering such passages, struggled mightily to keep our contempt firmly swallowed and tucked away from all views, our own included. To do otherwise, we believed, would be "to set ourselves against the Lord" and his inspired, inerrant Word.
3. Trouble is, we believed correctly. More troubling still, God got-and gets-to read the thoughts of our hearts. But more on this below.
2. For now, let's be bold, blunt, and unabashed. Psalm 2, scrubbed and unfiltered, comes across as the chest-thumping boast of an ancient Near Eastern would-be despot, and a petty one at that. (Remember that this is Israel we're talking about. It isn't Assyria.)
 1. Why does it come across this way? -because that's what it is.

2. The scholars refer to this passage more sedately as a coronation psalm. It was doubtless composed and publicly sung on the occasion of someone's ascent to the throne of Israel. Chances are the someone was either David or Solomon. Neither emerges from the Biblical record as an especially attractive man, at least where A.D. 21st century Americans are concerned. (Given the choice of being ruled by Solomon or Sadaam Hussein, the right-minded among us would likely choose Sadaam.)
3. Reduced to playground terms, Psalm 2 reads as follows: "My god is bigger and badder than your god. So cough up your lunch money."
3. Let's back up to 1000 BC or thereabouts, whenever this psalm first saw the light of day. Let's assume that renditions of it made their way via spy or ambassador from the coronation festivities in Jerusalem to the courts of Moab and Ammon, Syria and Edom, perhaps even to Egypt and Mesopotamia. One can expect either of two likely outcomes: umbrage was taken or jokes were told, depending on the economic and military strength, relative to Israel, of the court in which the song was being replayed.
 1. By contrast, it exceeds all sensible credulity to imagine residents of those courts responding to the psalm by composing hymns of their own to Israel's god and quickly sending tribute to Israel's new king.
4. What we imagine of reactions to the psalm in 1000 BC speaks volumes about the state of our own minds and hearts in 2002 AD. That is, we are certain our ancestors- this they are; we too are numbered among "the nations"- dismissed it derisively because we are certain we ourselves would do the same in their shoes. In other

words, we find it exceptionally easy to cast our sympathies with Israel's neighbors. Correspondingly, we find it woefully difficult to think well of Israel's king. And when Israel's king invokes the Lord as the source of his bullying claims, some of us might well be quietly inclined to accuse him of religious backwardness, if not perversion.

1. Parenthetically: many thoughtful Americans would make this accusation freely and boldly. Secular pundits of both print and broadcast media do so as if by instinct whenever their attention is drawn to the fiercer passages of the Old Testament in particular. (Thus, for example, an NPR commentary in June, 2005 by a hitherto biblically illiterate Roman Catholic reacting to her first encounters with the text in a parish Bible study.) Come to think of it, are not America's opinion makers rightly numbered these days among "the rulers of the nations"?
2. Again parenthetically: do we who belong to the nations not vastly prefer the spirit of Jonah 3 to the spirit of Psalm 2? But do we not also arrive at this preference by ignoring the fundamental harmony between psalmist and prophet? (Remember that Jonah's happy ending is predicated solely on the miraculous and otherwise unthinkable capitulation of Nineveh to the terms laid out in the psalm.)
5. Comes the problem. This aggressive rant of a wretched little king is presented to us as the Word of our God, to be heard, honored, believed, and obeyed-by us. This happens by the simple virtue of its inclusion in the Scriptural canon, and by the greater virtue of its frequent citation (whether directly or indirectly) by New Testament writers (Mt 3:17, Ac 13:33, He 1:5, 5:5, 2 Pe

1:17, Re 2:26-7, 12:5, 19:15) who use it to interpret the work and person of Christ. This identification-nasty little psalm; Word of God-is the snare that awaits us.
6. Beware. God is about to use this snare to “cross us up.”

STEP 1. “Let us burst their bonds asunder...” (External Problem)

7. Who of us fears God-really? Do we not prefer to like him? When we so rightly teach our children that “God is love” do we not also invite them-accidentally perhaps; without ill intent, certainly, but also quite wrongly-to imagine that God is by nature warm, affirming, and eminently likeable? Do we not ache for others to like God as we do? Is this ache not responsible, at least in some measure, for the current pressure to turn our churches into homes on the suburban range “where never is heard a discouraging word”? Where the skies are forever clear of clouds, not only the lesser clouds of frowning parishioner and difficult liturgy but also-especially-those fierce clouds of expectation and judgment that loomed at Sinai?
8. In such a context we instinctively rebel against Words of God like Psalm 2. The “vain thing” we have come to imagine about God excludes the possibility that God might be inclined to “dash them in pieces” and “break them with a rod of iron,” whoever “them” might be. Because of this we take counsel together-exegetes, parish pastors, and ordinary Christian sinners of all kinds (cohabiting twenty something; lap-of-luxury fifty something; world-weary eighty something)-to cast off the yoke of the psalm’s unpleasantness. Academics, deconstructing the psalm, agree to make like Marcion and strike it from the canon (it is merely David’s word; it can’t be God’s word). Pastors, encountering the psalm on their triennial tour of the lectionary, choose deliberately not to preach

it. As for layfolk, they simply ignore it. Come to think of it, what better, more effective way is there of dethroning the psalm? Of stripping it of its royal status as Word of God? Of challenging its claim on us?

- 9. Vanity of vanities: most of us dare to imagine that we are honoring God when we do this. It makes it easier for us to like him. It will make him more pleasing and attractive, we feel, to others. The more others like him as we do, the farther his reign is advanced. Or so we intuit.*

STEP 2: "The kings of the earth set themselves against the Lord and his anointed..." (Internal Problem)

- 10. Deeper things are afoot, however. Think idolatry. Think deicide.*
- 11. Why are we so intent on liking God? Is it not because we think God likes us the way God jolly well ought to? This, of course, is the standard fantasy of "the kings of the earth," the very thing we Americans presently are. As students of the American character consistently point out, Americans from the Plymouth Rock beginning have thought of themselves as favored people. More so than most royals, we also imagine ourselves to be likeable, to the point that we are stunned and aggrieved when the other-world peasantry gets surly and refuses to like us. Of course, the only god suitable for likeable people is a likeable god who really likes them. No wonder Jesus is primarily our pal these days. No wonder preachers find it surpassingly easy to carry on about God's tender goodness without the slightest reference to his goodness in Christ. (See also the popular delight in stanza 2 of "How Great Thou Art.")*
- 12. This likeable god-the god of our vain American imagination-is a god in process, continually morphing,*

his lineaments subject to constant refinement and redefinition. In his current form our god judgeth not, neither doth he condemn, whether temporally or eternally. Hell is no more. In this god's dispensation none are punished, all are saved. (Note the creeping universalism in the actual eschatology of our seminary classrooms and the operative eschatology of our funeral sermons.) When it comes to the choices we make in daily life, this god consistently affirms and approves no matter how we opt. If he frowns at all, it is only at our failure to affirm and approve of each other as fervently and steadily as he does. In matters of sexual conduct, traditionally a hot topic for the pious, he offers fewer and fewer opinions. He may chide us these days for our failure to attend to the poor, but the chiding is always gentle and tentative, never strong enough to leave us in any doubt at the end of the day that he does, after all, like us.

13. In dealing with this god, a crucified Messiah is quite beside the point.
14. To the extent that we find our hearts embracing this god, we set ourselves against the Lord. The two are not one and the same, as even the vainest imagination will at some point recognize. The Lord, after all, shows himself again and again to be thoroughly unlikable. Ask the residents of Sodom, or the chariot drivers in Pharaoh's pursuing army. Ask Achan, the fellow whose fingers got sticky at Jericho. Ask Absalom, or Ahab, or the residents of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Ask Ananias and Sapphira. Ask any American Christian who finds it increasingly easy to sympathize with such as these.
15. Ask American Christians, and one will get the sense from many that it is not only our prerogative but indeed our duty to turn away from the Lord God, and from his anointed, and instead to embrace the god we like, that

is, the god who likes us. And so we are doing.

STEP 3. "He who sits in the heavens laughs." (Eternal Problem)

16. Unfortunately the Lord is not a God who goes away that easily. Among other things, his Word abides whether we like it or not, whether we heed it or not. One sign of this abiding is the enduring and inescapable content of the Bible. We cannot read it without encountering passage after passage that causes us to squirm. The squirming gives us away, as in the present instance of Psalm 2. We cannot read it without understanding that at one deeply inward level we are in furious revolt against the God to whom the psalm bears witness.
17. Come to think of it, might there be something quite deliberate about the offensive character of the psalm? Has God not anticipated that rulers now, like rulers then, would kick against it? Has he not expected that we would react with loathing, as we have, to his adoption of David, and is he not using that reaction to expose our more primal loathing of him? Has the Lord not been using this psalm, in other words, to harden our hearts?
18. Be this at it may, the Lord, seeing our reaction, chuckles. He does so derisively. Our initial piety notwithstanding, he has caught us in the act of treason.
19. Though to say this presumes that the one who sits in the heavens is in fact the Lord and not another-that likable god of our manifest preference, for example. Here too it pays to keep one's ears attuned to the sound of ominous laughter.
20. Medieval Christians found echoes of that laughter in the ruins of Rome, scattered hither and yon across the face of Western Europe. Abraham Lincoln discerned it on the fields of Gettysburg. Are you and I prepared to hear the cackles at Ground Zero, or in the AIDS epidemic, or in

that seamy, dreary wasteland called 200 channel TV? Suburbanites might discover them in the cities and school systems they have long since fled, though the evidence suggests we've chosen not to. Even so, the slums abide. So does the drug culture, and rampant illegitimacy, and corporate misbehavior, and all manner of anxiety and worry and fear and heartache, and always-inexorably-aging and illness and accident and death. All these are-or ought to be-clear signals that [Christian] America's likeable god is a toothless deity of no standing whatsoever in the real world. Whoever runs this show is indeed at work with a "rod of iron," and there is no one who escapes being struck by it, no, not one.

STEP 4A: " I have set my king upon...my holy hill." (Eternal Solution A)

21. But if we still don't get it, then behold the greatest sign of the Lord's derision. This is the spectacle he mounted in that awful day when he set his king-not David, but David's Son-on the holy hill-not Zion, but nearby Golgotha. He hangs there clearly identified in Latin, Hebrew and Greek as King of the Jews. Does the multilingual identification not invite all people to see him not merely as the Jews' king but as the representative of all kings? What else can it mean when we hear of him that "he bore our sins on the tree"?
22. Jesus' crucifixion is therefore a statement of the Lord's regard for all kings of the earth. No, he does not like us. No, the Lord is not by any stretch of the vainest imagination a likeable deity. Yes, he does and will smite us with a rod of iron, even as the hammer drove those nails through the hands and feet of the king he sent to represent us all. So it is that Christ crucified is the Word by which the Lord will continue to "speak to them in

his wrath and terrify them in his fury.” (Is this why so many American Christians seems so desperate to adorn their worship spaces with “the empty cross”? -“Be warned, 0 rulers of the earth...”)

STEP 4B. The [LORD] said to me, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.” (Eternal Solution B)

23. Comes the mystery-the awesome wonder. The king who died on the hill as our representative was raised from the dead, and thereby revealed as the Lord’s Son. (See Paul’s preaching in Ac 13:33, where this verse is associated explicitly with the resurrection.)
24. At once we see the depth of our treason. We killed no petty tyrant, representative of a feeble, parochial deity, but the very Son of the God whose finger rests on the switch of life and death.
25. But we also see at once the inexpressible depth of God’s mercy. He let us kill his Son so that through his Son he might call us forth from our own pending destruction to new life.
26. After all, if Christ died as our representative, then he surely lives as our representative. Then all who acknowledge and own this representation can likewise expect to be “begotten” of the Lord and identified, with Christ, as the Lord’s own child with all the hope and promise that such a designation entails. (See Step 6 below.)
27. So it is that the unlikable Lord who likes us not at all turns out to be the God of love whose love for us exceeds all possible imagining; a love sufficient to save us from the rod of iron that he continues so busily to wield.

STEP 5. “Serve the LORD with fear. With trembling, kiss his feet.” (Internal Solution)

28. Christ, the LORD's anointed, is no escape from the rod of iron. In fact he himself now directs its use. This is surely one reason why St. Paul echoes the psalm with his exhortation to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12)." He writes this as the concluding reflection on his great end-time vision of every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. That final outcome necessarily entails a constant breaking and smashing of present delusions, false hopes, and misdirected loyalties, many of them lurking steadily within our own hearts. Hence the necessity, for example, of our weekly exercise in confession, which all of us would do well to take much more seriously than we often do. The sin of idolatry keeps springing up in my heart like dandelions in my lawn. I dare not leave it unattended. For his part, the Spirit of Christ will never pass up a chance to have at it with the weed killer.
29. Yet a promise attends the smashing and breaking-or in line with the new metaphor, the poisoning-which Christ directs. Healing and mending will follow. So will brand new growth and resurrection. Here is all the inducement we need to quit settling for the folly of the likable god who merely likes us but never loves us; the worship of whom entails endless pretence that all is more or less well in what is, in truth, a deeply damaged world. In contrast to fantasy, Christ offers strong reality, at once terrifying yet so full of hope and promise that none who taste it can ever let it go.
30. Not the least of Christ's promises-one that rightly causes fear and trembling in those who serve him-is a promise to use us as he himself was used in the Lord's grand project of saving the nations. As St. Paul for one so eloquently testifies, this means being broken and smashed so that others, being led to Christ, will also be

made whole. There is nothing likable about such a prospect, of course. On the other hand, those who embrace it will find, with Paul, the endless taste of joy, to say nothing of the Lord's final, affirming word: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

STEP 6. "Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (External Solution)

31. Such a Word is hardly one that we will want to dodge or flee. Neither is the God who speaks this Word a God to hide from, or to try somehow to replace. Is the Lord fearsome and terrifying? By all means. Yet through Christ his anointed one sees these attributes for what they finally are: a saving terror; a fearsomeness for us.
32. We thought, did we not, to defend our friends and neighbors from such a God? Isn't that, at least in part, what drove our struggle against the yoke of this ugly little psalm? What fools we were! Do we not now see how God's fearsomeness in Christ, on our behalf, is among his finest, most pleasing attributes? Is that fearsomeness not the first and finest of reasons for recommending him to our neighbor?
33. "Imagine this," we might say. "You are surrounded on all sides by the terror of the Lord. Only this time you are not that poor slaving fool of a chariot driver. This time you're the young mother, the wizened patriarch perhaps. One thought consumes you, that you should yet be able to usher your little ones safely down the amazing path that has opened up through the midst of the sea. Freedom beckons. The crowd surges forward. Already voices in front are shouting back the news that the far shore is in view. So tell me: how glad are you right now that the Lord who surrounds you is fierce and deadly in his wrath?"

34. "How good is that?" we might say. "How lucky are we that we get to recommend such a God to you? Do come. Switch sides. Join the crowd!" And if they hem and haw-if, in particular, they plead their unworthiness, how's this for a retort: "Just do it, for Christ's sake!"
35. And then, more winsomely: "The things you get to be in on when the feet you kiss belong to Jesus." Question: how blessed are we when we take refuge in Christ? Answer: so blessed that we ourselves become the royal subject of the psalm. We are the Lord's anointed whom he will set on his holy hill. We are he before whom the nations tremble, we too the wielders of the iron rod. Think Paul: "All things are yours... (1 Cor 3: 21-22). Think Christ: "Receive the Holy Spirit. The sins you forgive, forgiven they are. As for sins you retain, they are retained" (Jo 20:23).
36. To think, in other words, that we, in Christ, are David. Therefore we, at one and the same time the rebellious rulers of the nations, are to pay the tribute of repentance in part by kissing our own saintly feet. We do this when we honor our calling in Christ and allow ourselves, in counter-cultural fear and trembling, to exercise the awesome royal authority that the Lord's anointed has entrusted to us.
37. Imagine that! Phony rulers, broken by the Word, become real rulers through the Word. Soli deo gloria!

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