Rereading the Psalter with Captain America

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1. Introduction
This paper embraces J. R. R. Tolkien’s confidence that Fantasy can provide a means of recovery.¹ In Tolkien’s words: ‘We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness’.² In this paper the fantasy employed is the story of Captain America in the films known collectively as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). The subject with which we are overly familiar, and possessive of, is the Psalter. What might appear at first as an arbitrary appeal to Tolkien, finds hermeneutical promise in that rereading the Psalter is a collision of worlds. The biblical Psalter is a world. It has a rich multifaceted worldview that is articulated by the psalmist. The MCU is, as its very name suggests a universe, or for our purposes a world. One of its chief characters, Captain America, lives out a specific worldview within this world. Following Tolkien’s conception of Fantasy, both the Psalter and the MCU, in very different ways, provide ‘a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world’.³ At the end of this journey the rereading of the biblical psalms that is achieved will be seen to be coherent with both pre-critical readings and that of modern canonical readings. The reader must judge whether this admittedly unusual journey yields a fruitful rereading of the Psalter.

² Tolkien, Fairy-stories, p.67.
³ Tolkien, Fairy-stories, p.77.
The Book of Psalms has occupied a unique place in piety and theology throughout Church History. Key theologians, including Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin looked to the psalms for both doctrine and personal transformation. The 150 psalms have also exerted a huge influence on art, literature, liturgy, and sung worship over more than two millennia. In some churches biblical psalms are the only permitted sung worship and in other traditions they have been given a central place, such as in the English choral tradition. One of the features that has enabled the psalms to occupy this special place is the ease with which a connection is established between text and ‘reader’. The emotional dynamic that enables this was expressed well by Calvin who famously saw the psalms as ‘an Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul’. More recently the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, explained this well-known phenomena of the Psalter as a mirror of our emotions with acute interpretive insight in his typology of function paradigm. Brueggemann noted that the twin poles of orientation and disorientation are shared by the psalmist and the contemporary reader. In this way the gap between ‘then’ and ‘now’ is closed.

Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin saw the Psalter through the eyes of David and Christ. Modern Christian scholars are more hesitant about these two lenses, especially the latter. Understanding how and why this hermeneutical difference arose is what Captain America will help us understand. Before this, however, §2 surveys what it means to read the Psalter. This will provide the foundation we need to understand the complex hermeneutical choices available for interpreting the biblical psalms. In §3 three attributes that the psalmist shares with Captain America are examined. In §4 the complexity of psalms interpretation is explored in terms of the role of the psalmist and the reader in the various

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4 So, for example, R. E. Prothero, The Psalms in Human Life, London: John Murray, 1904, pp.13–21 and passim.
5 Athanasius waxes lyrical about the merits of the psalms, see Athanasius, ‘Letter to Marcellinus’, pp.97–119 in On the Incarnation, A religious of CSMV (translator), Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. Augustine’s Expositions of the Psalms are considered as important for understanding Augustine as the Confessions and City of God according to Edmund Hill and John E. Rotelle, Expositions of the Psalms 1-32: Volume I, New York: New City Press, 2000, p.18. Aquinas understood the Book of Psalms as containing all of theology, see David Berger, Thomas Aquinas and the Liturgy, Catholic University America Press, 2013. For Luther our praise, facilitated by the psalms, is central to our learning to love others more effectively, see Brian Brock, Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, pp.165–237.
6 This is explored in Susan Gillingham, Psalms through the Centuries, volume 1, Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.
8 John Calvin, Calvin’s Commentaries: Psalms, Volume 1, James Anderson (translator), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948–49, p.xxxvii. Calvin is most likely, either consciously or unconsciously, building on Athanasius, who says of the Psalter: ‘within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul’. See Athanasius, ‘Marcellinus’, p.103.
interpretable paradigm. This study closes in §5 with a closing word regarding the Psalter as a prayerbook.

2. Reading the Psalter
The term reading is perhaps not the most helpful one when describing the interpretive and transformative process of someone engaging with the psalms as Scripture. Indeed, the solo and silent engagement with Scripture, which comes to mind, excludes some historically significant ways in which the psalms have been used and have functioned, over more than two millennia. Throughout this paper the word ‘reading’ should be understood in a broader sense informed by the discussion below.

Reading a psalm is a practice that predates the formation of the collection of psalms found in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Scholars have long speculated on the origin of individual psalms and there is not space here to consider this in detail. The basic point that needs to be appreciated, however, is that individual psalms originate from a variety of different contexts. These include liturgical use in specific religious rites, temple worship, local community use, and as didactic literature. It is the case, however, that complete certitude regarding the creation of any one specific psalm is often obscured by the editing that they have undoubtedly undergone to bring them together as a purposeful collection. If we accept this diverse origin of the individual psalms we can see just how anachronistic the term reading is, if we use it in its narrow everyday sense. Using the psalms might originally have included, for example, hearing spoken liturgy in a rite such as a king’s coronation, singing hymns in the temple, reciting a prayer of healing, as well as reading with didactic intent. If these were some of the original uses, we can expect that there are times when the psalms can, and indeed should, be used creatively, dramatically and liturgically in similar ways today. Until the aftermath of the Reformation, reading the psalms comprised a broad range of activities, and this pre-critical interpretation universally took place from a stance of faith and a context of praxis. Later in this paper it will be helpful to distinguish between reading and re-reading, but for now the term reading refers to any act of appropriating the meaning and significance of a psalm.

During the Reformation the new-found impetus of sola scriptura, the impact of the printing press, and the rise of the university, all contributed to a complex process which lead to a divergence in understanding of, on the one hand psalms as written text, and on the other their use in the Church. Whilst this was inevitable, and not necessarily undesirable, at its most extreme the scholarly study of the psalms was at odds with long-established interpretive paradigms. This is certainly true of the two dominant critical approaches that matured in the first seventy years, or so, of the twentieth century. These two approaches are sketched below

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14 This is key part of Brueggemann’s basis for his interpretive paradigm in which he pays serious attention to the psalms liturgically, devotionally and pastorally, see Brueggemann, ‘Life’, p.6.
as a prelude to understanding the more recent scholarly consensus—a very different paradigm which is coherent with psalm usage in the Church.

Critical psalms scholarship, in the first half of the twentieth century, was dominated by the work of the German Old Testament scholar Herman Gunkel.\(^\text{15}\) His work is generally termed form criticism because of its privileging of a psalm’s form within the interpretive process, with a view to understanding how it was originally used. Gunkel’s goal was to understand the *Sitz im Leben* (situation in life) of each psalm or the ideal psalm from which it originated. Gunkel’s work was undoubtedly insightful but it had the rather unhelpful consequence of fragmenting the Psalter into individual psalms. In fact, Gunkel often went further than this. In his pursuit of ideal psalm forms he created what is now an indefensible hypothesis that Jewish religion declined after a golden age in the eight century BCE.\(^\text{16}\) This led Gunkel to identify many of the biblical psalms as late and religiously deficient compositions, because they mixed the various types he had identified.\(^\text{17}\) This led to the view that although psalmody started as cult worship, the later psalms originated outside the cult.\(^\text{18}\)

The Norwegian scholar, Sigmund Mowinckel, built on Gunkel’s work by considering a closer connection between biblical psalms and Temple worship. Where Gunkel privileged literary form and ancient context over more traditional interpretive approaches, Mowinckel made the ancient cultic context central to his scholarly interpretive paradigm. Mowinckel’s approach is sometimes known as cult criticism because of the importance of not only Temple worship but its dependence on a hypothetical New Year autumn cultic festival.\(^\text{19}\) This and other rival hypothetical festivals became something of a scholarly preoccupation in the middle of the twentieth century.\(^\text{20}\) The highly speculative nature of these approaches and more recent scholarly developments have meant that the privileging of such approaches has fallen into abeyance but many of the broader insights are viewed as having ongoing value. Gunkel’s work still provides the basic terminology for categorising the psalms.

Whatever the scholarly merits of the approaches developed by Gunkel and Mowinckel, both unintentionally drive a wedge between study of the psalms in the academy and use of the


\(^{16}\) Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, pp.331–332.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p.330.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p.20.

\(^{19}\) The reconstruction of this hypothetical festival supplies a framework which underpins much of his two-volume work: Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, volumes I and II, Oxford: Blackwells, 1962.

psalms in the Church. Two more recent developments have been found to have greater promise at enabling scholarly rigour to cohere with ongoing psalm use. One of these, briefly mentioned above, was proposed by Brueggemann. The second of these approaches is distinctly different in nature to Brueggemann’s but is in no way antagonistic to it. This approach’s origin can be traced to Brevard Childs who proposed what is now termed canonical criticism as an attempt to address the sharp divide between modern critical approaches and understanding the Bible as Scripture. In his study of the Old Testament as Scripture he pointed out that the Book of Psalms has a number of features that point to it being a literary whole that has been formed with intent. Gerald Wilson, who studied for his PhD under Childs’ supervision, examined the extrabiblical and biblical data that supports the hypothesis of purposeful editorial intent in a series of works. The overarching principle of discernible editorial intent in the purposeful shaping of the Psalter has been adopted as the dominant contemporary scholarly paradigm for current psalms research.

If we accept that the Psalter is shaped by its final editors, and that they did this purposefully, then it is essential to focus on the Psalter as in some sense a literary and theological unity rather than a disparate hodgepodge of texts. This means that an understanding of individual psalms requires, among other things, attention to their wider literary context within the Psalter. Such a paradigm also provides fertile ground for theological readings of the Psalter and such readings have a natural affinity with reading the psalms from a stance of faith. The rest of this chapter will explore reading and rereading the Psalter, (i) Davidically, (ii) Christologically, and (iii) through Captain America’s eyes. We shall see that, what might at first sound like an absurd or contrived trinity of perspectives provides a fruitful pathway for perceiving aspects of how the psalms function as Scripture today.

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3. The Psalmist

3.1 The Righteous Psalmist

A key feature of the psalmist is righteousness. So prominent is this righteousness, and the psalmist’s conviction of possessing it, that the psalmist is prone to being misunderstood. Rather than celebrating the psalmist’s commitment to Yahweh (e.g. Psalm 4:3) or devotion to the law (e.g. Psalm 1:1–2) the modern reader might see the psalmist as self-righteous. This misconception about the psalmist, for misconception it most certainly is, will be considered at the end of this section. At this point we simply note, along with the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s Ultron, that Captain America can be clearly identified as exemplifying righteousness, like the psalmist. That Ultron perceives Steve Rogers as self-righteous, is evident in this statement by Ultron to Rogers:

‘Captain America—God’s righteous man. . . I can’t physically throw up in my mouth, but . . .’

Captain America: Age of Ultron (2015)

Ultron is not the first opponent of Captain America to misconstrue his stance. In Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), Red Skull accuses him of arrogance, going as far as claiming ‘that you do it [arrogance] better than anyone’. It is interesting to note that Red Skull has misread Rogers’ motives. He is unable to understand Rogers’ actions, he can only read them through his own self-serving response to being granted super powers like those of Rogers.

Any attempt to take the psalms seriously as a purposeful collection gives rise to the possibility of reading the Psalter from the perspective of a single implied author. The implied author reveals time and again that they consider themselves righteous. Traditionally this implied author came to be identified with King David as he was assumed to be the actual author of the Book of Psalms. Evidence of this is found in ancient literature and the New Testament. For example, according to a document known as the ‘Psalms Scroll’ found at Qumran, David was the author of some 4,050 psalms. At a similar time, the author of the letter of the Hebrews viewed David as the literal author of Psalm 95, a psalm which is not attributed to David in the Masoretic textual traditions, see Hebrews 4:7. Despite this strong tradition, such a uniform view of Davidic authorship is questioned by many features of the Psalter itself, including clear allusions to the exile (e.g. Psalm 137:1), the psalm headings which point to other psalmists including the Korahites, Asaph, Heman the Ezrahite, etc., and the use of term ‘of David’, which heads some 72 psalms having a range of potential meanings, not just authorship. Most scholars today doubt whether many, if any, canonical psalms were penned by David. This does not alter the fact that the received text of 150 psalms implies a very close connection with

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David. This is evident in the widespread use of the Hebrew term translated as ‘of David’ in the MT (later versions of the Book of Psalms such as the Greek Septuagint and Syriac Peshitta have additional psalms attributed to David). Whatever it means, it indicates a strong connection with David. Furthermore, some psalms are intentionally linked to episodes in David’s life (Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63 and 142)—they are termed Biographical Psalms below. Even though there are good reasons to see these biographical headings as late, if we take the final form of the Psalter seriously, we need to pay attention to them. Those that edited the Psalter, as it took its final shape, saw David’s life as an interpretive lens. More attention is given to these biographical headings in section 3.2 below.

Arguing that the Psalter is Davidic might not seem to advance an argument as to the righteousness of the psalmist. David’s failures, such as adultery (2 Samuel 11:2–5) and arranging the death of Bathsheba’s husband Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11:14–15), seem at odds with such a claim. This is due in part to a misunderstanding of the psalmist’s claim to be righteous as a statement of moral perfection. It also needs to be appreciated that there are distinct threads of editorial intent. Grant has shown that some psalms are concerned with the ideal Davidic king. These are a subset of so-called Royal Psalm, that have been deliberately placed alongside the Torah Psalms: Psalms 1, 19 and 119. This editorial intent provides justification for the tradition of reading the psalms with a Davidic lens.

The translators of the Septuagint, the Qumran community, and early Rabbinic Judaism all saw Psalm 1 as intentionally paired with Psalm 2, to provide an entry into the Psalter. These two psalms are linked in a number of ways by linguistic devices. The uniqueness of both Psalms 1 and 2 and their intentional unity at the start of the Psalter indicates that their content is in some sense a hermeneutical key to the whole Psalter. The Psalter’s final shape was established well into the post-exilic period, and consequently one emphasis is on portraying

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27 Brown, ‘Overview’, p.3. 
29 Gunkel’s definition of Royal Psalms by ‘the fact that they are concerned entirely with kings’ in Gunkel, An Introduction to the Psalms, p.99 is anachronistic as it is not a category based on form. Nevertheless, it has persisted as a useful category nevertheless as these psalms tend to resist categorisation by other criteria. 
33 deClaissé-Walford, Beginning, p.19 argues that ‘the Psalter achieved its “substantial” form sometime in the late Persian/early Greek period (late 4th century)’, but acknowledges that there was some ongoing fluidity regarding the order of Book IV and V until first century CE. Other scholars argue for an earlier
David Redux—the future Davidic messiah. So, for example, although Psalm 2 might have had a much earlier life as a liturgical psalm used in a rite such as the king’s coronation, in common with other such psalms, editorial intent in terms of minor editing and its placement invest it with this new perspective.

This pairing of these two psalms means that the ‘blessed man’ of Psalm 1 is one and the same as the anointed king of Psalm 2. When we consider the combined attributes of this Davidic King, we see that re-reading this ideal as the Risen Christ was the most natural of interpretive moves for the early Christians. It is therefore unsurprising that Psalm 2 is quoted seven times in the New Testament (Acts 4:25–26, 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5; Revelation 2:26–27, 12:5, 19:15). The torah-delighting anointed king is an ideal figure and provides a basis for reading the Psalter Davidically (in anticipation of the coming King) or Christologically. Grant explores two other psalm groupings which build on this ideal figure, Psalms 18–21 and Psalms 118/119.

The ideal figure portrayed in these eight psalms, shares a lot in common with Captain America. Psalm 2 makes it clear that the Davidic king is chosen by God as he is anointed to be ruler. David, the first of this line, was chosen by God when the previous king, Saul, had lost favour with God. David was chosen and was favoured according to the Prophet Samuel despite his outward appearance (in contrast to the tall handsome Saul, see 1 Samuel 9:2) and because of his good heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Steve Rogers was chosen in a similar vein according to Abraham Erskine who created the metabolic enhancing serum that turned Rogers into Captain America. Early in Captain America: The First Avenger (2011) he defies military reasoning in rejecting a strong but heartless soldier for his research programme. He favours the feeble Rogers because in his words, “I am looking for qualities beyond the physical”. Later in the film Erskine explains this to Rogers more fully:

"The serum amplifies everything that is inside, so good becomes great; bad becomes worse. This is why you were chosen. Because the strong man who has known power all his life, may lose respect for that power, but a weak man knows the value of strength, and knows . . . compassion.”

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)

Although the historical David was not ideal on the outside this did not prevent him from wielding the power of a king. The eschatological David, anticipated in Psalm 2, exemplifies earthly power at its most potent; ready to avenge the nations that conspire against his God. In the MCU, Captain America not only joins the team of superheroes known as The Avengers but increasingly, as the films progress, this involves using might on the international stage. Ultimately this culminates in him defying a treaty, the Sokovia Accords, signed by 113 nations date of around 200 BCE, so for example Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, Die Psalmen I: Psalm 1–50, Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993, p.8.

34 Grant, King, pp.41–56.
35 Grant, King, pp.71–188.
in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). He decides he has no choice but to defy the will of the nations who seek to regulate and control the activities of so-called enhanced individuals. His refusal to comply is showcased in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) where it becomes clear that he will stand firm because his principles will not enable him to compromise in any way. This amounts to a judgment that the collective nations of the world cannot be trusted to wield the power represented by superheroes. His stubborn conviction is ambiguous in nature—is it righteousness that arises from commitment to a higher authority than the United Nations or arrogance in assuming he is the arbiter of right and wrong?

The picture we have looked at thus far regarding the Davidic King of the Psalter exemplifies what might be termed a *theologia gloria*. Such a portrait is incomplete, as alongside the promise of this righteous leader who can defy nations there is another. In the next section the suffering of the historical King David, as portrayed in the Psalter, is considered. It will become clear that Captain America has also been shaped by the experience of suffering.

### 3.2 The Suffering Psalmist

When reading the Psalter, it becomes apparent that the psalmist knows suffering, as well as blessing. Sometimes this spectrum of experience seems puzzling as the Psalter moves from one pole to the other. This takes place frequently even within the same psalm. In terms of the Davidic lens the portrait painted in Psalms 1, 2, 18–21, 118 and 119, considered above, idealises the future David with little or no hint of trial or suffering. The Biographical Psalms do quite the opposite. There is, it might be said, a tension between the past David of history and the future David of faith. In Christological terms when Jesus is viewed as the psalmist the psalms examined in section 3.1 exemplify a *theologia gloria* consistent with the risen and ascended Christ, whilst the biographically-headed psalms, and indeed many others, have a theology of suffering, or *theologia crucis*. For example, the Biographical Psalms testify that David, the psalmist:

1. Has many enemies (so, for example, 3:1; 7:1; 18:3, 17; 54:3; 56:1; 57:4; 59:2; 60:12; 142:3).
2. Is in need of deliverance (see 3:7; 7:6; 59:1; 60:5).
3. Faces, or has faced, death (so 18:4; 54:3; 56:13, 63:9).

It will be noted that Psalm 18 is simultaneously one of the groups considered in section 3.1 and one of the Biographical Psalms. In this way it bridges the *theologia gloria* of the former and the *theologia crucis* of the latter. This psalm is interesting in combing the two distinct Davidic threads. Importantly the Psalter as a whole unites these two Davidic concerns. Reread from a Christological perspective, the combination of the two poles takes on new significance. It is not only Psalm 18′s dual nature that cautions against drawing too stark a distinction between these two groups of psalms. In addition, it should be noted that throughout the Biographical Psalms, where the psalmist consistently cries out in anguish, there is an incredibly strong sense of trust in Yahweh on the part of the psalmist. This is found in a range of metaphors that share a common semantic range implying protection, these include: a hand held shield (Psalms 3, 5 and 18), an angel of the Lord being encamped around the psalmist (Psalm 34), the
walls of Jerusalem (Psalm 51), being in the house of God (Psalm 52), the concept of evil recoiling as if off a shield (Psalm 54), refuge under Yahweh’s wings (Psalm 57), being in a fortress or fortified city (Psalm 59 and 60), and the idea of refuge.

Like the psalmist, Steve Rogers has enemies both from within and without his own community. He also finds himself in situations from which he needs to be delivered both physically and psychologically. His role as a soldier means that facing death is a day-to-day reality. Like the psalmist he acknowledges allegiance to the one true God. For example, he does not recognise Thor and Loki as gods:

“Ther’s only one God, ma’am, and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t dress like that.”
Avengers Assemble (2012)

Unlike the psalmist his protection comes most obviously from a physical shield rather than a metaphorical one. Beyond this correspondence, there is a biographical side to Steve Rogers that speaks of the experience of suffering. There are a number of tangible events that causes him grief and pain. As a teenager he was physically very weak and as a consequence experienced bullying. Something in his character, both resilience and a sense of justice, ensured he chose to fight back rather than flee. He explains this to Peggy Carter:

Rogers: “I got beat up in that alley. And that parking lot. And behind that diner.”
Carter: “Did you have something against running away?”
Rogers: “You start running they’ll never let you stop. You stand up, push back . . . Can’t say “no” forever right?”

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)

Peggy Carter becomes important to Steve Rogers, for as he gets to know her, they fall in love. Unfortunately, before their relationship deepens, in an act of self-sacrifice he crashes in an aircraft, The Valkyrie, in the Arctic. The nearly 70 years spent frozen there means that he is only reunited with her in a retirement home (Captain America: The Winter Soldier, 2014). Not long after this she dies (Captain America: Civil War, 2016) whilst Steve Rogers is struggling with the break-up of the Avengers as they find they cannot decide on a joint response to the Sokovia Accords. In addition to struggling with the loss of the women he loved and the implosion of his superhero team, he also suffers the loss and then problematic return of his best friend, James Buchannan “Bucky” Barnes. He had thought that his childhood and wartime friend Bucky died after falling from a train in the close of World War II, but he finds him alive, almost seventy years later (Captain America: The Winter Soldier, 2014). The recognition is difficult and painful as Bucky does not know his own identity, let alone recognise his old friend. Even worse, he is now equipped with a powerful prosthetic arm and is intent on killing Captain America because he has been brainwashed to do so. In this specific experience, Rogers can truly empathise with the pain of the psalmist:
Even my close friend, someone I trusted,  
one who shared my bread, has turned against me.

Psalm 41:9, NRSV

Like the Davidic character of the psalms, Steve Rogers experiences a *theologia crucis* whilst as Captain America he continues to embody the righteous man who trusts in God and fights for justice.

### 3.3 The Psalmist’s Choices

We have seen that the Davidic lens reveals a psalmist with a dual nature. On the one hand he is the King David of history, crying out to God in desperate need of deliverance. On the other hand, he is King David redux, the ideal king who has survived the trials and tribulations of the life of faith to return again—he is God’s perfect anointed (for example, Psalms 2:2; 89:20 and 132:17) who will bring about justice, and subdue the nations (Psalms 2:9 and 110:1). The David of history, time-and-again, is seen to exemplify trust whatever his current experience.

In by far the majority of psalms he is also righteous and makes decisions that are right before God. Even when he has sinned, his hope in God indicates that he anticipates the possibility of restoration and a fresh start at righteousness. In a sense the righteousness and right choices of the psalmist explain this journey from the historical suffering David to the ideal vindicated future Davidic King.

In a similar fashion when the psalmist is perceived as Jesus Christ we can see how the Biographical Psalms and the Individual Laments echo the Jesus who, had nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20 and Luke 9:58), had powerful enemies (e.g. Mark 14:55), was betrayed by his friends (Mark 14:18; 14:66–72), was tortured (Mark 15:16–19), and executed on a cross (e.g. Mark 15:27ff). Such a hermeneutical trajectory is even legitimised by Jesus’s self-identification as he uses Psalm 22 whilst dying nailed to a cross (Mark 15:34). Unlike King David he did not sin, but like David his life of trust vindicated him and was the basis for understanding how a man who embodied a *theologia crucis* could rise again as proof of a *theologia gloria*. In Jesus the Messiah, the promised Davidic king has appeared—the surprise is that he not only embodies the promise of glory, but this can only be perfected in suffering.

The Hebrew Bible is full of depictions of the importance of making the right choices in life. The so-called Wisdom Books capture this as ‘fear of the Lord’ (e.g. Proverbs 1:7, Job 28:28, and Ecclesiastes 12:13). The Psalter has the polar categories of the righteous and the wicked, and the choice between obedience and disobedience. Psalm 1 captures the ‘two ways’ poetically in terms of a rooted tree and the wind-blown chaff (Psalm 1:3–4). Captain America uses one of these metaphors as he argues for the need to stay committed to the right choice:

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‘Even if the whole world is telling you to move, it is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye and say “No. You move.”’

Captain America in *Captain America: Civil War*, 2016

He lives this out and the MCU films provide several examples. The first example is seen in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) where he insists on what looks like a suicide mission to rescue hundreds of soldiers who are captured 30 miles behind enemy lines. We have already mentioned his refusal to sign the Sokovia Accords on principle which put him at odds with world governments and the Avenger Tony Stark.

We turn now to the fuller complexity of psalms interpretation; whereby various paradigms are explored, and the role of the reader is considered. Here we find that it is not Steve Rogers’ superpowers that help us understand what it means to read the Psalter. It is rather his humanity that means he exists from moment to moment between the poles of joy and despair.37 In recognising this we realise that the Psalter is truly democratic—everyone and anyone can find themselves in this book. No matter our circumstances we find ourselves there. It is fitting that Captain America, of all people, should be our chosen champion of the democratic nature of the Psalter.

4. The Complexities of Reading and Rereading the Psalter

4.1 Fusing Horizons and Reader Response

It was the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer who formalised the hermeneutical process of understanding an ancient text as a fusion of horizons.38 His illuminating idea is that a text is understood when there is a connection between two contexts (or horizons), ancient and contemporary, which leads to new hermeneutical position. This is very much the nature of Brueggemann’s typology of function model of psalm interpretation. It is helpful to consider how the various paradigms of understanding the psalms facilitate Gadamer’s fusion of horizons and Brueggemann’s connection between modern reader and the ancient text’s function.

The form critical and cult critical methods, by their very nature, viewed the psalms as a combination of idealised forms and expressions of hypothetical ancient contexts. This makes them legitimate approaches to understanding the origin, nature and function of ancient psalms. They do, however, have a tendency to put so much emphasis on the ancient text and original reconstructed context so as to build a barrier preventing appropriation of a psalm from a stance of faith. The canonical critical approach offers greater potential for appropriation of the psalms because the gap between then and now is lessened. This approach is built on the inherent assumption that the editing of The Book of Psalms—the shaping of the


Psalter—was done from a perspective of faith. This not only facilitates fusion, in Gadamer’s language, it is also compatible with the pre-critical approaches that Church History can testify to the spiritual value of.

The Davidic and Christological approaches discussed above are, in origin, both pre-critical approaches. The former to an extent is one lens of the Psalter’s final editors, as illustrated above with reference to Grant’s work on Psalms 1, 2, 18–21, 118 and 119. The latter approach originated from the former by virtue of a change in the horizon of some readers. What is being suggested is that a Christian who follows the Jesus Christ, who both suffered and rose again, cannot help but read the Psalter Christologically. More specifically this will be a reading through the twin poles of suffering and glory—a theologia crucis and a theologia gloria.

One of the reasons why this approach lowers the barrier between ancient and modern horizons is because, as Brueggemann has argued at length, it depends only on the common human experiences of pain and joy. In this way the Christ Event, the Psalter, and human experience each revolve around two poles: cross/suffering and salvation/joy. We return to Captain America whose life make sense of the psalms because despite his abilities he is still one of us—he is human.

4.2 Reading Legitimately
One, and it is only one, of the reasons why there exists a plurality of interpretive approaches for reading the psalms (and of course other texts too) is that the reader’s stance makes a fundamental difference. We can appreciate that someone worshipping in an English cathedral will read Psalm 22 through different lenses compared to a professor conducting a philological study of the Hebrew text of Psalm 22. The former makes a rereading because of a dependence on the Rule of Faith, and the latter in their more ‘scientific’ aims, a reading. Of course, there is no reason why the reading and rereading might not be made be one and the same person.

One of the challenges of a plurality of readings is that of legitimacy. This is especially acute for what can be termed reader response approaches. If the meaning comes, at least, in part from the reader is this not at the expense of the text? Both Brueggemann’s approach and Gadamer’s fusion of horizons amount to forms of reader response criticism. Both recognise pragmatically what happens when the Psalter is read or reread. The words of ancient author mediated through Davidic story, the Christ event, and the reader’s situation in life quicken the text and it is appropriated. Sometimes this process is said to reveal the elasticity of a psalm—it bends and stretches as the reader’s experience connects current situation to ancient situation, or horizon to horizon. Pragmatic though such hermeneutical processes are, we still

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39 So, for example, Jason Byassee, Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
face the issue of establishing whether Steve Rogers’, for example, finding comfort in a Psalm of Lament is legitimate as well as helpful.

In post-modern hermeneutics the question of the legitimacy of the many possible readings and re-readings of a text is especially acute. Although of course it should be noted that soon after Christianity emerged from Judaism different schools of biblical interpretation emerged. Much has been made of the Alexandrian School’s supposed preference for allegorical/figural interpretation over and against the Antiochene School’s favouring of the literal interpretation. Though there is some truth in this distinction, the hermeneutical choices are more complex than this and both schools have elements of literal, moral, doctrinal and figural interpretation.41 This demonstrates that the question of biblical interpretive legitimacy is complex and has been so from the outset of Christianity.

We have already seen that historical critical interpretation took the Psalter and fragmented it, with the goal of getting either back to the original ideal psalms, or the situations in life that gave rise to them. In this sense rather than reading the Psalter we have a process of reading something behind or before it. Such approaches are, of course, legitimate from a singular scholarly perspective. It is in this context that dissection can lead to new insights about ancient culture, the evolution of literature and language, and the history of religion, but as Hans Urs von Balthasar famously pointed out, in his criticism of the excesses of historical criticism: ‘Anatomy can be practiced only on a dead body’.42 Whilst both form criticism and cult criticism can provide valuable insights they cannot be privileged when reading the Psalter as Scripture. The canonical approach, on the other hand, can be coherent with a stance of faith. This is because at its very heart it is concerned with the whole rather than the parts and how the whole was generated from a purposeful, i.e. a community faith-based process. In this way, a canonical approach legitimises a Davidic reading of the Psalter.

As the canonical approach to the Psalter has developed various interpreters have discerned a storyline within the fivefold structure of the Psalter. Table 1 summarises three such proposals. The first proposal shown in the Table is from Gerald Wilson.43 As can be seen he sees the shape of the Psalter as centred on the failure of the Davidic line. Though other scholars who follow the textual support for an overarching narrative have tended to make more of the positive nature of Book V in terms of post-exilic restoration and/or eschatological expectation. In Table 1 deClaissé-Walford’s proposal is shown and can be seen to be essentially a more fully worked-out narrative that generally coheres with Wilson.44 The final column of Table 1 shows an example of structure expressed in explicitly theological terms by O. Palmer Robertson.45

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41 See, for example, Young, *Formation*, passim.
44 DeClassié-Walford et al., *Psalms*, pp.21–38.
All three interpreters honour Balthasar’s warning and look to the whole of the Psalter and its form. In this way all three read the whole book Davidically, but Robertson goes further and reads it Christologically. What is interesting is that they have all embraced a new critical method and relocated the Psalter as Davidic. In this way they achieve what earlier critical methods ignored—a recognition of the importance of David. In this way they cohere with pre-critical approaches that read the Psalter Davidically. Pre-critical interpreters also read the psalter Christologically.

Table 1 Three proposals regarding the narrative behind the five books of the Psalter.

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<tr>
<td>I (1–41)</td>
<td>David’s monarchy</td>
<td>A chronicle of the reigns of David and Solomon</td>
<td>Confrontation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II (42–72)</td>
<td>The failure of the Davidic monarchy to David’s descendants</td>
<td>The story of the divided kingdoms and their destruction</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III (73–89)</td>
<td>Yahweh, rather than David, reigns</td>
<td>The Babylonian Exile and the evolution of the community of faith</td>
<td>Devastation</td>
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<tr>
<td>IV (90–106)</td>
<td>A celebration of the community of faith’s restoration</td>
<td>Maturation</td>
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<tr>
<td>V (107–150)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Consummation</td>
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The step that Robertson makes, a Christological rereading, is made possible only from a stance of faith, i.e. using a prior Rule of Faith. Captain America would doubtlessly not hesitate to make a Christian reading of the Psalter. In some sense he is an embodiment of his own nation’s ‘Rule of Faith’. His ideals embody the American Dream narrative. This is seen in his patriotism in wanting to fight for his country and his commitment to battle against the odds to succeed in this goal (see Captain America: The First Avenger, 2011). His unflinching resolve to see ‘might as right’ when facing tyranny also coheres with the American Dream. As the rhetorical questions in Captain America’s song, The Star Spangled Man, puts it:

Who’s strong and brave here to save the American Way?
Who vows to fight like a man for what’s right, night and day?

_The Star-spangled Man_, Alan Menken and David Zippel

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46 This song is seen being used to raise war funds in Captain America: The First Avenger (2011) as Captain America performs a routine with a chorus line of attractive women.
Once Steve Rogers received his powers, he was transformed not just through the medical procedure but the fusion of his wishes to fulfil the American Dream. In a very real sense Captain America eclipses Steve Rogers. The night and day motif in the *The Star-spangled Man* echoes the poetical American mantra that “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty”. This sentiment is essentially part of an ideology, as is the psalmist’s call to mediate day and night on the law—an ideology that galvanises the Psalter as ‘law’ given the Psalter’s fivefold form and the prominent place given to this exhortation (Psalm 1:2).47

Despite our claim that reading with Captain America has enabled a fresh look at the Psalter, a reading through the lens of the Rule of Faith, rather than the American Dream, is appropriate given the Psalter’s very nature. Such a theological reading is appropriate given the growing recognition that the hegemony of critical approaches has been broken, as interpreters ‘of faith’ have been bold enough to deny the hermeneutical mantra that the Bible must be read like other literature. Despite the interpretive risks we must reread as well as read the Psalter. Rereading using the Rule of Faith identifies the future David as Christ. Rereading from the Life of Faith quickens the text. This quickening brings us to our final section and a consideration of the efficacy of Scripture.

4.3 Transformative Reading

A key feature of any superhero’s story is their origin story. This is the narrative which explains how they went from being an ordinary frail human being to someone with powers. What is refreshing about Marvel superheroes is that they tend to still have some frailty, character flaw, or weakness, alongside their powers.48 Captain America, as we have seen, is no exception. In addition to the baggage outlined above, the righteousness that drives his desire to change the world around him can stray into arrogance. In this way the story of Steve Rogers recognises that powers, and indeed power, do not supersede the frailty implicit in being human. Captain America, however, does not see the limitations and dangers of power—he sees only the choice as to who has the moral authority to wield it. This is evident in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) where he essentially argues that his judgement will be the right one when it comes to the decision of how and when to act with military might:

*James Rhodes (War Machine):* I’m sorry. Steve. That - that is dangerously arrogant. This is the United Nations we’re talking about. It’s not the World Security Council, it’s not SHIELD, it’s not HYDRA.

*Steve Rogers:* No, but it’s run by people with agendas, and agendas change.

*Tony Stark (Iron Man):* That’s good. That’s why I’m here. When I realized what my weapons were capable of in the wrong hands, I shut it down and stopped manufacturing.

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Steve Rogers: Tony, you chose to do that. If we sign this, we surrender our right to choose. What if this panel sends us somewhere, we don’t think we should go? What if there is somewhere, we need to go, and they don’t let us? We may not be perfect, but the safest hands are still our own.

The only transformation that Steve Rogers undergoes in the MCU is that induced by the drug and electro-therapy of Abraham Erskine (in Captain America: The First Avenger, 2011)—and this is only a transformation in physical prowess and intelligence not moral vision or character. In the real world of Christian discipleship, we look to God to transform our moral vision and character. Our examination of the Psalter thus far has considered a variety of hermeneutical perspectives. Notwithstanding their complex variety, on the matter of the Psalter’s transformative efficacy they fall into three groups:

1. At one end of the spectrum, there are those methods that privilege academic neutrality—which must put aside faith—these methods such as form criticism and cult criticism can transform us cognitively as new scientific understanding of social setting, religious literature, and religion is hypothesised.49
2. At the other end of the spectrum, there are methods that privilege Christian faith. These approaches, championed by the likes of Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin expect to find Christ in the Psalter. Such approaches expect the possibility of the transformation of the reader’s character and moral vision.
3. In the middle we have the recent canonical approach which recognises the theological purpose of the Psalter’s redactors, which among other things made the Psalter thoroughly Davidic. This approach offers transformation of the reader’s eschatological and moral vision.50 Such an interpretive approach is entirely consistent with the use of the Psalter from a stance of faith and from a sharp critical perspective.51

This essay cannot settle the issue of legitimate readings. We cannot push our rereading of the Psalter with Captain America so far as to say which of the above three would make sense to him. Instead we close by leaving the fictional MCU and turning to another righteous man, who opposed the tyranny of Nazism. This man is no literary fiction or fantasy.

49 This is not to say that they cannot inform use of the psalms that might have further transformational potential, but rather that that such a move must be a distinct exercise requiring new presuppositions.
51 It is interesting to note that the canonical approach appears to have been taken up almost exclusively by scholars with a commitment to both the academy and faith.
5. A Last Word from the Psalter

Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutics of the Psalter has not received much attention, but I suggest that he offers some wisdom to us. He now of course, he knew nothing of the canonical approach, mentioned above, and yet his concern for intellectual rigour and serving the Church means his interpretive method coheres with group 3 above. For Bonhoeffer, like Bultmann and Barth, there can be no presuppositionless interpretation of the Bible. Nor a Bible other than for the Church. Thus, the elusive neutrality of privileging critical methods, is not for him. Bonhoeffer, however, knows the harsh reality of life in a post-critical world. He might share the faith of the Fathers, the great medieval theologians, and the Reformers but he pays attention to the Jewishness of the Scriptures. This means that he reads the Psalter both Davidically and Christologically. Thus, for Bonhoeffer, reading the Psalter, whatever else it means, means prayer:

Who prays the Psalms? David (Solomon, Asaph, etc.) prays, Christ prays, we pray. We—that is, first of all the entire community in which alone the vast richness of the Psalter can be prayed, but also finally every individual insofar as he participates in Christ and his community and prays their prayer. David, Christ, the church, I myself, and wherever we consider all of this together we recognise the wonderful way in which God teaches us to pray.

In the real world, the world illuminated by the Strange New World within the Bible, where the might of Captain America is an entertaining fantasy, righteousness is a frail shield against evil. In praying the psalms, we trust in the one who is our shield, Jesus Christ—the psalmist par excellence. In this age we share in his theologia crucis. By faith, we look heavenwards, and so to the age to come when we will also share in his theologia gloria.

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53 An essay by Bultmann is often seen as pivotal in the evolution of twentieth century biblical hermeneutics (Rudolf Bultmann, “Ist Voraussetzunglose Exegese möglich?” in Theologische Zeitschrift, 13 (1957) 409–17. Barth’s magnum opus, the fourteen volume, Church Dogmatics, in its very title exemplifies Barth’s commitment to the role of faith in theology.

54 Bonhoeffer, Psalms, p.21.