

Zion – Much More Than a Metaphor: Response to Carolyn J. Sharp

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Carolyn Sharp's excellent, and thought-provoking paper on the "memory of Zion in Christian Preaching" is an impressive plea for preaching the Old Testament in Christian contexts without any supersessionism. At the same time, the paper is an invitation to discover the wealth and abundance of the Hebrew Bible. I would dare to say that Psalm 87 is almost never preached in my Church; it is one of the Psalms which do not appear in our lectionary, and in a Google search, I found only two recent German speaking sermons on this Psalm. Sharp shows in a compelling way that this omission is a pity. Psalm 87 should be part of our lectionary and one of our preaching texts. And with this example, Sharp points to the task of rediscovering the forgotten (or almost forgotten) texts of the Hebrew Bible in our Christian tradition. Throughout history, we, the Church, have a Biblical canon (in a slightly different shape in different Church traditions). But (of course!) we never really live with the *whole* canon of the Bible; we use selective canons. And Carolyn Sharp's exegetical and homiletical re-reading of Psalm 87 shows that we should dare to open the Biblical treasures¹ more for ourselves and for our congregations. (And, maybe we should even start a joint international project on preaching the [almost] forgotten texts of the Bible). – After this introduction, I have three remarks on Carolyn Sharp's paper.

(1) *The Judean diaspora or the peoples of the world?*

My first point is nothing more than a little exegetical remark or question on reading Psalm 87. Of course, it may be correct historically to say that those mentioned in Psalm 87 (Rahab and Babylon; Philistia and Tyre, with Cush) are historically (in the postexilic time in which Psalm

¹ The metaphor "treasures of the Bible" is from the first Constitution of the Second Vatican Council "Sacrosanctum Concilium" (1963): "The treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years" (SC 51); cf. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html [accessed 07/16/2022].

87 was composed and first sung) the people of Judea in diaspora contexts, the Judean diaspora. All of them, the widespread diaspora, belong to Zion.

Sharp mentions the translation of the Septuagint that adds “mother” in v. 5 thus strengthening a reading that includes a striking religious universalism: *They* were born here, not only the Judeans in diaspora contexts, but the nations, the peoples. In Luther’s Bible translation, the title of Ps 87 is: “Zion wird die Mutter der Völker” (“Zion becomes the mother of the peoples”). The seeming exclusivism connected with Zion with this specific topography is the basis for a radical inclusivism of all the peoples of the earth – including Israel’s main enemies.

I agree that Psalm 87 makes complete sense if we read it with the Judean diaspora in mind. But do we really have to *limit* the interpretation of this Psalm to this context? Would a both- and reading be possible – instead of an either-or-reading?

On a more general level, this is also a question of the relationship between homiletics and exegesis, asking specifically about the normativity of exegetical work. How do we deal with exegetical results hermeneutically? Is there a chance to see the role of Biblical scholars as the role of those who offer *possible* readings and interpretations of Biblical texts – and whose main task might be *to open up* rigid and fixed interpretations again and again to enable fresh and relevant readings of the Bible (instead of only repeating traditional and conventional interpretations)?

Would this still be in accordance with the necessary critical responsibility of exegetes to prevent preachers and congregations from false interpretations? Yes, I think it would. So maybe exegesis could be – in a metaphor – the preparation, arranging and limiting the ‘playing field of interpretation’ again and again for those who engage in interpretations (in schools and kindergartens, universities and congregations etc.) – thus at the same time limiting the range of interpretations (the playing field has its borders) and enabling new interpretations. This would be a way in which exegesis and preaching can work together as disruptions of our conventionalities (and also of our anti-Judaism that is somehow deeply inscribed in Christian self-understanding).

(2) *Zion – religious and political topography*

My second point is more central and deals with the main argument of Sharp’s paper: How to talk about Zion in our Christian preaching? Sharp claims that “all who hold Jerusalem and the Psalms sacred may preach about the holy city, honoring the ancient poems in their historical and theological particularity while not hesitating to embrace them as core to newer sacred

traditions.” I think that with this sentence, Sharp describes perfectly the homiletical task when we preach on Zion. Zion is at the same time a concrete topology, a place on earth, a mountain in Israel, in the city of Jerusalem, *and* it is a metaphorical space that was, can be, and will be inhabited by many people around the world and through the ages. The problematic *and* salvific task for preachers is to hold these two aspects together.

Sharp shows Jerome’s allegorical and typological interpretation and could easily add many more interpretations through the ages – for example, Martin Luther’s love for the Psalms, which arose from his idea that everything, the whole life of human beings (of Christians) with all the depths and all the highlights is included in the Psalms – thus reading the Psalms in a wide anthropological and at the same time constant Christological frame, *but* forgetting Zion, forgetting the religious and political topography, the Jewish people who are those who first of all and through the ages sing the Psalms.

Yes, Lutheran theologian Rolf Jacobsen, whom Sharp quotes, is right when he says:

“The Psalms *must* be preached. Why? Because the Psalms literally give us the words to live all of life before God ... so that the Lord’s people will not struggle to find the right words when they experience the inevitable highs and lows of the life of faith ... [The Psalms] are what a living faith in the living God sounds like out loud.”

This is correct, but I would say that this is true *only* if the Psalms remain connected with the people of Israel through the ages and today. And only if they are preached knowing that we – as Christians – are not the only and surely not the first ones who pray and preach these texts. And only if we know that Zion and Jerusalem are not symbols for Christ or God or Christian community or religious experiences, but primarily concrete places on earth.

This connection with Zion has at least three dimensions that are central to our Christian preaching:

(1) First, as the paper notes, the political dimension of Zion comes with some ambiguity because of the conquest story of the city of Jerusalem, because of the Muslim and Christian conquests in the early and high Middle Ages, and also because of the current political situation. Zion is not a ‘clean’ and is never a ‘pure’ metaphor, but it is connected with human history, with war and hostility, with power, violence, and vulnerability. Remembering Zion leads to joyful celebration *and* to lament – and it is always political.

Preaching Zion in a Christian context should also remember the problem of Christian Zionism that is a phenomenon especially prevalent in the US and in Europe, but also in neo-pentecostal movements in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.²

God, who is with God's chosen people, God who is with Jesus Christ, and all who are called in his name, is interwoven in a history, which is ambiguous and never unequivocal. And Zion stands for this aspect.

One of the most popular Advent hymns – at least in my context – is “Tochter Zion, freue dich”, “Daughter Zion, rejoice” with a text written by Friedrich Heinrich Ranke in 1826. It is based on Handel's oratory “Judah Maccabeus” (and later: Joshua) and the text in the original version reads: “See, the conqu'ring hero comes”. Advent is political, as Zion is political, and as the story of Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem is political (cf. Mat 21:1–10).

(2) I read with fascination that in Sharp's second dimension of talking about homiletical chances she speaks about “the covenantal fidelity of Judeans who live permanently in diaspora” and whose life “has given glory to YHWH”. Yes, preaching on Zion means preaching in dialogue with those who represent Zion in different contexts, in dialogue with Jewish people all over the world; it means listening to Jewish voices. For me, this also means listening to Jewish interpretations. Let me just give one example quoting the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 8a:

„[...] Rav Hisda said as follows: What is the meaning of the verse: ‘The Lord loves the gates of Zion [*Tziyyon*] more than all the dwellings of Jacob’ (Ps 82:3)? This means that the Lord loves the gates distinguished [*metzuyanin*; a play with the roots of the word Zion] through the study of *halakha* as they are the gates of Zion, the outstanding gates, more than the synagogues and study halls. Although those places are the most outstanding of the dwellings of Jacob, they are not engaged in the study of *halakha*. And this concept, that *halakha* is the most sublime pursuit, is expressed in that which Rabbi Hiyya bar Ami said in the name of [Ulla](#): Since the day the Temple, where the Divine Presence rested in this world, was destroyed, the Holy One, Blessed be He, has only one place in His world where he reveals His presence exclusively; only the four cubits where the study of *halakha* is undertaken.”³

² Cf. Stephen Sizer, Christian Zionism. Road-map to Armageddon?, Eugene (OR) 2004.

³ Quoted according to <https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.8a?lang=bi> [accessed 07/16/2022].

We see here how the Rabbis in Talmudic times read Psalm 87, connecting the words of their Psalm with their religious and spiritual practice. This is an exciting example of interpretation, which could lead analogically to new Christian interpretations.

(3) I am convinced that Christian identity can never be an identity of those who ‘have’ their Christian life, but constantly remains eschatologically open.⁴ Remembering our religious tradition, as Sharp beautifully communicates, always means that we narrate ourselves into the history of Israel. We are not simply ‘Israel’, but remain connected with Israel through the Jew, Jesus, whom we call Christ. The people of God and the gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ are connected, and this leads to a complicated but always eschatologically open Christian identity. I would say: this is exactly where preaching Zion leads us to. I am grateful that Sharp reads 1 Peter 2 along this line – not reducing Zion semantically to Jesus Christ, but seeing it as a place marker for the people of Israel.

(3) *The interconnection of preaching and worship*

My third and last aspect is a purely practical-theological one which Sharp does not mention directly in her paper: What does it look like to *preach* Biblical songs/hymns? Should they be talked about or should they be sung? Or is there something in between? I think, in Sharp’s paper, she opens up the possibility for more than just preaching; she opens up paths which lead into liturgy: lament (which is so powerful and so often neglected at least in my German Protestant liturgical tradition), but also praise – both ways of performing eschatological hope in times and days of crisis.

One final remark – offered with a bit of wink: Hamburg, Christmas Eve 2015. I want to believe every word Sharp communicates in her paper. And I surely don’t want to mask or hide the situation our formerly German ‘folk churches’ are in today (we are rapidly losing members, and on a ‘normal’ Sunday morning only around 3.7% of the Protestants go to church – and this

⁴ Cf. Alexander Deeg, *Leben auf der Grenze. Die Externität christlicher Identität und die Sprachgestalt kirchlicher Gottesrede*, in: *Identität. Biblische und theologische Erkundungen* (BThS 30), edited by Alexander Deeg, Stefan Heuser, and Arne Manzeschke, Göttingen 2007, 277–300, and cf. a more recent radio interview on „Deutschlandfunk“ (June 19th 2022): <https://rundfunk.evangelisch.de/kirche-im-radio/feiertag/leben-auf-der-grenze-12397> [accessed 07/16/2022].

was before the Corona-crisis).⁵ But, on Christmas Eve, we count around 8.1 million people in our churches, and the churches are usually packed (or used to be so before Corona). Some even speak about a “Christmas Eve religion” in Germany⁶ – as December 24 is the day that also attracts those who would never go to Church all year long. The incarnational drive of Christian theology at Christmas seems to be much more attractive than the soteriological drive of Good Friday, which was traditionally one of the most important days for Protestants.

But I have to accept what Sharp says and learn that sometimes even Christmas Eve shows that we somehow live in the ruins of what has been. But as we learn through Sharp’s brilliant paper: the ruins can always be a symbol of hope and eschatological change.

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⁵ Cf. <https://www.ekd.de/ekd-statistik-22114.htm> [accessed 07/16/2022].

⁶ Cf. *Matthias Morgenroth*, *Heiligabend-Religion. Von unserer Sehnsucht nach Weihnachten*, München 2003.