

Where Is Your God? Luther on God's Self-actualisation

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Dean O Wenthe and others (eds), *All Theology Is Christology. Essays in Honor of David P Scaer*. Concordia Theological Press: Fort Wayne, 2000, 117-131

Luther occupied the chair in the holy Scriptures at the University of Wittenberg for most of his working life. Professionally, then, he worked as an exegete and lectured on various books of the Bible. In the last part of his life he concentrated mainly on the Old Testament. As he reworked his Catholic heritage evangelically in these lectures, he repeatedly reflected on the apparent localisation by God of himself at the temple in Jerusalem. He, as it were, took up the ancient taunt of the pagan idolaters against the Israelites for their lack of idols and asked himself: 'Where is your God?' His answer was that the process of divine self-localisation which had begun in the Old Testament culminated in the incarnation of our Lord.¹ In the man Jesus God localised himself once and for all far more physically and completely than any pagan god in any statue.²

In this paper I would like to explore how Luther deals with the self-localisation of God at the tabernacle and the temple in the Old Testament.³ My interest in this is threefold. First, I am interested in Luther's understanding of the continuity between Israelite and Christian worship. Secondly, since much of Luther's teaching on this topic was forged in response to the enthusiasts, I would like to ascertain how Luther can help us as we develop a biblical liturgical theology in response to the challenge of the Pentecostal movement. Thirdly, as we this year celebrate the 450th anniversary of Martin Luther's death, I offer this as tribute to David Scaer for his feisty advocacy of the holy sacraments and the apostolic ministry.⁴ A translation of three important texts, in which Luther deals with God's self-localisation, is also given as an appendix to this essay.

1. The place where God wills to be found

In a sermon on John 6:51 from 1531 Luther said: 'If you want to have God, then mark where he resides and where he wants to be found' (LW 23, 121). In that remark we have the foundation for Luther's theology of worship and God's self-localisation in worship.

It is, of course, true that God was naturally present⁵ everywhere in all his creation (LW 37, 57-63; cf 6, 127; 23, 121; 36, 342). Yet, even though God was present everywhere, he was present in an elusive, hidden way, masked and concealed from human sight. He did not make himself accessible and available everywhere for everybody, but only for his people in certain appointed places.⁶ There he was present *for* them (LW 37, 68f). God then had chosen where he would meet with his people. There he opened himself to them; there he revealed himself to them and gave them access to himself. There he was present in grace rather than wrath (LW 2, 286). There he heard the prayers of his people, accepted their offerings, and blessed them (LW 2, 284, 285; 4, 178; 6, 128; 23, 121; WA 40.III, 52-54, 336-337).

God chose these meeting places; his people did not chose them and establish them where they willed (LW 6, 127-129). Since God willed to dwell in these places and to reveal himself there,

the people could take hold of God there. If they sought God there, they could be sure that they would find him. It was as if God had said:

I will not let myself be found, I will not hear or be worshipped, at the places of your choice. Cities, forests, meadows, hill and vale are all mine, to be sure; but I do not want to be worshipped, honoured, or acknowledged there; I insist that you worship me in the place and in the manner which I shall prescribe for you (LW 23, 121).

Luther traces this theme of God's self-localisation right through the Old Testament. Already in the garden God gave our primeval parents the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as their 'temple'. Luther understood it as a sacred grove. There they as physical beings could worship God physically (LW 1, 94f; cf 1, 130, 131). It was 'Adam's church, altar and pulpit' (LW 1, 95).

The fall resulted in the radical displacement of human beings. Luther develops this theme of spiritual dislocation graphically in connection with the curse on Cain (LW 1, 293-295, 298-301, 306). Cain was turned loose without any word of God. Like a bird which is free to roam the open air, he is simply sent out to any indefinite place and work without a word of promise or command from God. Suspended between heaven and earth and at home in neither realm, he becomes a restless wanderer who cannot settle permanently anywhere, an anxious fugitive who has no security and stability anywhere. Since he is without God's word, he is displaced and left without any given location; he does 'not know what to believe, hope, or endure'; he has 'no certainty as to the outcome of anything' that he does or undertakes to do (LW 1, 300). In contrast to Cain, Seth 'had a definite promise, definite places, definite ceremonies for the worship of God' (LW 1, 301).

After the fall God gave the dislocated primeval couple the sacrifices as a sign of his gracious presence with them (LW 1, 249; cf 3, 106) and as a place where they could call on his name (LW 1, 327-330). God carried this one step further with Abraham and the patriarchs by appearing to them at particular places in the land of Canaan and designating them as holy places (LW 2, 284, 286f; 5, 78; 6, 225f, 250). They built altars at these places where their descendants later served the Lord. Luther explains the significance of this in his discussion on Abraham's erection of his first altar at Shechem:

Abraham did not arbitrarily select this place for an altar. The Lord himself, who appeared to Abraham there, selected it; for the Lord is its first founder. He shows himself there because he wants to be worshipped there and have his promises proclaimed (there) (LW 2, 284).

Yet despite the establishment of these altars, the worship of the patriarchs was not restricted to any single 'special place' nor conducted in any 'fixed form' (LW 4, 183). That came later.

The most decisive step in God's self-localisation in the Old Testament came with the establishment of the tabernacle at Mount Sinai and its eventual location in Jerusalem. In the law of Moses God determined where, when, how and by whom he was to be worshipped (WA 4.125.36.35f). After the lawgiving at Sinai, the tabernacle was the place which God appointed for the Israelites to 'gather there, and perform the sacred rites there' (LW 2, 285). After locating the tabernacle first at Shiloh and then at Gibeon, God eventually chose Jerusalem as his dwelling place (WA 40.III.54.1-3). God commanded Solomon to build a temple there for him as a place of sacrifice and prayer. There he resided with his glory hidden in a cloud. There the infinite God chose to be enthroned on the mercy seat and to dwell between the cherubim. There he 'was enclosed in the mercy seat, to which he had bound himself' (WA

40.III.336.16). He promised that ‘he would speak from the mercy seat to draw the people’ to himself there (LW 6, 127). He promised that he ‘would dwell there, be present, and hear the invocations and prayers of those who called upon him’ (LW 4, 178).

Since Jerusalem was the only place which God had designated for Israel’s worship, the people who lived far from Jerusalem, or even in exile like Daniel in Babylon, turned bodily to Jerusalem and directed their prayers to that place, for ‘God did not will to hear prayers anywhere else except in that one place’ (WA 40.III.52.35). Luther went even further than that in stressing the localisation of God there. He maintained that whenever the prophets and psalmists spoke about God, they always referred to the God who dwelt in Jerusalem and so was, as it were, contained there (WA 40.III.335-338; cf LW 12, 352).

In all this Luther was working out the implications of Christ’s incarnation exegetically and liturgically. His basic conviction was that God dealt with us physical beings physically. Human beings do not find God by climbing up self-made ladders into heaven. The ladder to heaven, as is shown in the story of Jacob’s dream, comes down to earth. This is how he describes it:

God governs us in such a way that wherever he speaks with us here on earth, the approach to the kingdom of heaven is open ... But where is that place found? On earth, where the ladder which touches heaven stands, where the angels descend and ascend, where Jacob sleeps. It is a physical place (locus corporalis), but here there is an ascent into heaven without physical ladders, without wings and feathers (LW 5, 247).

Luther then understands God’s self-localisation in the tabernacle and temple incarnationally. Hence he has this to say about the presence of God in Jerusalem:

God ... dwelt bodily (there). The people of Israel were enjoined to pray nowhere but at God’s dwelling place, which he had chosen and designated ... Therefore all who lived in the land were obligated to address their prayers and fix their hearts to the place where God sojourned bodily through his word, to assure that they would worship no other God than him who sat enthroned over the cherubim on the mercy seat (LW 19, 80f).

2. The place where God dwells through his word

How could God’s people know where God was to be found? Luther answered this question most simply: ‘our theology ... teaches that God wills to hear (prayers), be served, sought and prayed to, according to his word rather than our fancies’ (WA 40.III.52.19-21). Here we have a fundamental principle in Luther’s theology of worship, so fundamental that he, rather surprisingly, speaks of two categories of worship – right worship with God’s word and idolatry without God’s word (see LW 35, 268-273).

By his word God instituted and established the place of worship which was acceptable to him and the manner of worship which was pleasing to him. By his commands God designated certain places where he willed to be found and certain modes of worship which pleased him. By his promises he ‘bound himself’ to those places, so that his people could approach him there and meet him there (WA 15.94.7, 12; 40.III.336.16). Since he had made his will known to them in his word, they could be sure that he would receive their sacrifices and hear their prayers at the place which he had chosen; they could be sure that he would be pleased with them and would accept them there; they could be sure that he would be graciously present with them and bless them there. God’s word which had established these places also consecrated them and everything done there in obedience to it (LW 2, 284f; cf WA

40.III.56.26-29). So, since God had instituted their worship at a particular place, the Israelites could be certain that God was pleased with them and their worship at this place. Luther says:

God wants our conscience to be certain and sure that it is pleasing to him. This cannot be done if the conscience is led by its own feeling, but only if it relies on the Word of God. Therefore if they should worship God in a place chosen by themselves, even if they pleased themselves thereby, nevertheless they would not to be sure that they were pleasing God. They were sure that they were pleasing him only if they made offerings in a place set apart through the Word of God (LW 9, 123).

Through his word God not only revealed where he had localised himself for his people; he also localised himself for them there in and through his word (LW 36, 342f). In this way the God who was present everywhere and available nowhere became present for his people, so that they take hold of him by faith and love him. Those then who had God's word had God by faith in his word (LW 37, 18). God dwelt in Jerusalem through his word (WA 40.III.57.16f). Since he had revealed himself verbally to his people there, they had access to him through his word and the name revealed in his word (LW 3, 117; WA 40.III.335-336).

God's word, however, was always accompanied by outward, visible signs of his gracious presence and approval of them (LW 3, 117). These showed the people where God was to be found and gave them access to him. The people 'took hold of God' in these (LW 3, 108). Such sacramental signs included the sacrifices, by which God revealed his grace to them and his approval of them (LW 1, 249f; 3, 106), and the rite of circumcision (LW 3, 145f, 106-109).⁷

God, then, localised himself physically for his people through his word and the sacramental signs which he had instituted for them. He, as it were, enclosed himself in them and created a ritual place for himself with them. Luther put it thus:

the God of the children of Israel ... had revealed himself in a certain Word, in certain miracles and in a certain place, in Jerusalem ... This God is not a vague god, like the god whom the Turks worship. He is a God revealed and, so to speak, sealed. He has circumscribed himself with a certain place, word, and signs, so that he might be acknowledged and grasped (LW 12, 352).

Luther based this understanding on God's self-localisation through his word on two sets of related texts in the Old Testament. The first of these is Exodus 20:24 where God says: 'In whatever place I make a memorial of my name, I will come to you and bless you' (see LW 3, 146, 163f; 6, 128, 265; 19.80; WA 25.94.10f; 40.III.52.21f). By this Luther understood that God was to be found in the place where he had commanded that his name and his word were to be proclaimed. The second of these consists of those passages in Deuteronomy where God commands the centralisation of Israel's worship at the place which he has chosen to set his name: Deut 12:5 (LW 4, 128; 6, 127; 35, 269); Deut 12:13f (LW 4, 128; 6, 127; 17, 378; 13, 121; 35, 269), and Deut 16:5f (LW 2, 285). Luther's interpretation of these passages was that the Israelites were to worship God at the place and in the manner which he had prescribed for them, for by his word God had localised himself in a particular place through his holy name.⁸ Ritually speaking, God replaced the pagan idols with his holy name as the instrument for his self-localisation.⁹

Now, if God had instituted the worship of his people at Jerusalem through his word, any form of worship which he had not instituted was idolatry. Luther therefore maintains: 'it is idolatry to establish worship as a result of one's own choosing and not as a result of a command of

God' (LW 2, 284). God does not wish us 'to teach him how he is to be served', since he has prescribed how we are to worship him. Without God's word 'all is idolatry', no matter how devout and relevant it may appear (LW 35, 270). Because idolaters despised God's word, they set up their own places of worship apart from his word (LW 4, 178f) and devised their own service of God (LW 2, 284f, 355; 5, 241f; LW 35, 269). Jereboam was the prime example of this (LW 5, 241; 12, 352). He offered the right sacrifices to God; he may even have prayed more fervently than the people in Jerusalem. Yet his sacrifices and prayers did not please God because they were offered at a place which God had not authorised (WA 40.III.52.27-35) and in a manner which God had forbidden (LW 5, 241f). Those then, who sought God where they pleased, apart from his word, were guilty of idolatry (LW 6, 127; 35, 269-273).

Luther holds that the living God localised himself for the people of Israel at the temple in Jerusalem. He localised himself there ritually through the words spoken by human beings and the acts performed by them in the service there. In this way God, as it were, made himself physically accessible and available to his people. Luther concludes:

God in his divine wisdom arranges to manifest himself to human beings by some definite and visible form which can be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands, in short, within the scope of the five senses.¹⁰ So near to us does the Divine Majesty place Itself (LW 3, 109).

3. Jesus our sanctuary

In his early years Luther taught that, with the ascension of Jesus, the worship of God was not confined to one place in Jerusalem but could be conducted anywhere on earth (eg LW 13, 33-36). But, after his bruising battles with the enthusiasts, he frequently spoke about the ascension of Jesus as the culmination of his self-localisation. Thus in 1532-33 he says:

In the New Testament we have been freed from attachment to external places ... Our spiritual place is Jesus Christ, because God has determined that he will hear nothing except through this place Christ ... Christ is our one and only place, our time and everything else required for prayer. Just as the Jews had no other sanctuary than the one in Jerusalem, so we have no other sanctuary than this one: Jesus, Son of Mary (WA 40.III.53.19-35).

He developed this in two ways, christologically by reference to the humanity of Jesus as the place of God's presence, and liturgically by reference to the word and the sacraments as the means of access to his presence.

First then, Luther understood Christ as the culmination of God's self-localisation. The living God 'dwells bodily in the man Christ Jesus' (LW 19, 80). Jesus therefore is our place of worship and prayer (WA 16.576.17). He is our one and only 'sanctuary' (WA 40.III.53.35), our 'temple' where God 'wills to be sought, adored and served' (WA 40.III.336.12; 337, 32). He is our 'altar' where we present our sacrifices of prayer and praise to God (WA 16.530.22; 531.16). He is our 'mercy seat' where God speaks graciously with us and we speak confidently to him (LW 19, 80; WA 40.III.336.3f, 11; 337.15f; 399.16f).

Outside Christ 'there is no God' (WA 40.III.337.21), and God is nowhere to be found (WA 40.III.339.14). Outside Christ 'no other god is to be worshipped or sought' (LW 12, 352), because there is nothing for us to believe, hope or obtain apart from him (WA 40.III.53.24f). Everything that God has for us is found in Christ (WA 40.III.57.21). Where Christ is 'the Father and the Holy Spirit are found' (WA 40.III.338.36; cf LW 23; 54-56). We therefore find

God only in the man Christ ‘who was in Mary’s womb and sucked at her breasts’ (WA 40.III.338.34f; cf LW 23, 123). In fact, Luther goes so far as to assert: ‘I know nowhere to find God, either in heaven or on earth, except in the flesh of Christ’ (LW 23, 123). Whoever takes hold of Christ the man ‘has’ God (WA 40.III.400.21).

Secondly, Luther argues that the God who dwells in the human body of Jesus now localises himself for his people in the church through the physical word and the physical signs of baptism, the eucharist and the absolution (LW 1, 248-251; 2, 286; 3, 108f, 111; 5, 244, 247; 6, 128f; 23, 123; WA 40.III.54.23-25). The ministry of the word creates a ritual place where God has willed ‘to be found, to hear, and to bless’ his people (LW 3, 164). He has appointed this ‘place where the church should come together to hear the Word of God, offer prayers, praise God, and bring sacrifices to God’ (LW 2, 284). In fact, Luther maintains that the ministry of the word is our fixed place of worship, for ‘where the Word resounds and the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution, there is the true tabernacle of God’ (LW 4, 179). Christ then is to be found in the church which he builds with his word as his ‘new dwelling, a new Jerusalem’ (LW 51, 304). The church is his castle and chamber, the place where ‘the entire Trinity dwells’ (LW 51, 305).

People should therefore ‘look in faith to the place where the Word and sacraments are’ (LW 5, 247). There God makes himself audible to human ears, visible to human eyes, and tangible to human touch. Thus Luther understands the word of God and the sacraments locally as places of a kind where ‘God is present and gracious’ (LW 2, 286). He says:

Christ must be sought where he has manifested himself and wants to be known, as in the Word, in baptism and in the supper; there he is certainly found, for the Word cannot deceive us (LW 3, 108).

4. Conclusion

Since the Enlightenment it has become increasingly unfashionable to speak locally about God’s presence with his people and spatially about his dealings with the church. Scholars feel most comfortable in regarding worship and piety in one of three ways, mentally in terms of ideas or subjective experiences of God, historically in terms of events or interactions between God and his people, existentially in terms of a personal I-thou relationship with God or of an act of commitment to him. They are often then intensely embarrassed by the apparent self-localisation of God in the Old Testament and refuse to acknowledge it in the New Testament.

Luther, however, did not hesitate to speak locally about God. He obviously had a very robust sense of place and was well aware of the importance of place for most people physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually. He used local categories to counteract the excesses of the spiritualists. He developed the notion of station as part of his doctrine of vocation and spoke about the relocation of believers into their rightful position before God the Father through faith in Jesus Christ. In his maturity he came back again and again to the wonder of God’s gracious self-localisation for his people.

Luther taught that the process of divine self-localisation, begun with Israel in the Old Testament, culminated in the incarnation of Christ and his ongoing presence in the church. By relocating us in the man Jesus and in the church through his word and sacraments, God reverses our primeval dislocation and makes himself available to us space-bound creatures. We who had lost our place with God and had ceased to be at home even in our own bodies now have our place with God in Jesus and his body. We find our home with him in his word,

his name and his flesh. Luther then leads us away from a disincarnate, individualistic spirituality to a spirituality which is corporate in both senses of the word. He sums up his teaching on the self-localisation of God for us well in the following way.

By his almighty power God could save the human race without Christ, without baptism, and without the Word of the gospel. He could have illuminated men's hearts inwardly through the Holy Spirit and forgiven their sins without the ministry of the Word and of ministers. But it was not his will to do so. And God very strictly prohibited all erring forms of devotion and worship (cultus) ... God abominates and condemns all erring thoughts outside the one and only revelation made in the Word and sacraments, in which he willed to gather and include us ... He wants us to be gathered in the Word and baptism as a sure and infallible sign that he wills to save and help us, just as he promised he would listen at the mercy seat among the people of Israel (LW 6, 128).¹¹

Endnotes

- 1 The main texts in which Luther develops the theme of God's self-localisation are LW 1, 94f, 248-250, 309, 330; 2, 284-286; 3, 108f, 163f; 168f; 4, 178-183; 5, 241-251; 6, 127-129, 265f; 12, 352; 13, 33-37; 19, 44f, 79f; 23, 120-125; 37, 68f; WA 16.530f; 25.94; 25.236f; WA 40.III.51-57, 335-339, 399-443. See also Luther's rather helpful discussion on three possible modes of presence in LW 37, 214-230, parts of which are quoted in the *Formula of Concord Solid Declaration*, VII, 93-103.
- 2 Partial treatments of this theme can be found in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr Robert C Schultz, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1966, 20-24, 35-42 and in Jonathon D Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, Brill, Leiden, 20-60.
- 3 The most significant general monographs by Old Testament scholars on the nature of God's presence with Israel are: RE Clements, *God and Temple: The Idea of the Divine Presence in Ancient Israel*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1965; and S Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1978.
- 4 The material in this essay was first presented as part of a symposium to celebrate the 450th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther held at Luther Campus, on 22-23 March 1996. David Scaer has written a number of stimulating essays on the sacraments and the holy ministry. They are: *The Sermon on the Mount as Eucharistic Homily*, Concordia Theological Seminary Press, Fort Wayne, no date given; *Ordination: Human Rite or Divine Ordinance*, Concordia Seminary Press, Fort Wayne, no date given; 'Baptism and the Lord's Supper', *CTQ* 45 (1981), 37-59; 'The Validity of the Churchly Acts of Ordained Women', *CTQ* 53 (1989), 3-20; 'Sacraments as an Affirmation of Creation', *CTQ* 57(1993), 241-244; 'Augustana V and the Doctrine of the Ministry' (?).
- 5 In LW 19, 44f Luther distinguishes between the natural and spiritual modes of God's presence. While God is naturally present as creator and judge everywhere in everything, he is spiritually present only where he reveals himself through the Holy Spirit in his word to the faithful in divine worship.
- 6 In LW 3, 163f; 4, 178 and 6, 266 Luther illustrates this teaching linguistically by explaining the theological significance of the tabernacle as a *mo ed*, ie a definite and specified place of worship.

- 7 In addition to these, Luther adds the following signs of grace in LW 1, 248: the burning incense, the glory cloud, the Red Sea, the manna, the brazen serpent, the tabernacle, the temple of Solomon, and the temple cloud.
- 8 The best recent study in English of the formula for the centralisation of worship and its significance in Deuteronomy has been completed by JG McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy*, JSOT Sup 33, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1984, 21-38.
- 9 For a discussion on the replacement of the idol by the divine name in Israel, see John W Kleinig, *The Lord's Song*, JSOT Sup 156, Sheffield, 1993, 64-66.
- 10 The Latin of this is most graphic: 'in summa, quae quinque sensibus exposita sunt', ie 'in sum, which have been exposed to the five senses'.
- 11 The translation of this passage has been corrected in a number of places.

TRANSLATION OF PASSAGES ON GOD'S SELF-LOCALISATION

1. Luther on Isaiah 1:12 from WA 25.94.5-19

'When you come before my face' properly refers to the priests who enter the Holy of Holies where God had promised that he would be publicly present and would hear the prayers of the faithful. Since God had bound himself to that place by his word, they are said to see the face of the Lord. It was a great privilege that God had bound himself to that physical place (*corporali loco*) so that human beings would know for sure where they might find and take hold of God. For this is what Exodus 20:24 says: 'Wherever I make a memorial of my name, I will be there'. This is why God could never be found nor could he be sought in any other place than where he had bound himself by the word. In the law he willed that a physical place (*corporalem locum*) be established as the only place in the whole world for the service (*cultus*) of God. It was idolatry to perform a sacred rite anywhere else. That is why the Jews in foreign lands would turn their faces to the temple when they prayed. But in the New Testament no other single definite place has been established. Since God has granted us Christ as our redeemer, wherever the word of the gospel is taught and believed our prayers and all our works are pleasing to God on account of Christ. But whatever is prayed, taught and lived outside Christ is idolatry before God, and a sin.

2. Luther on Psalm 121:1 from WA 40.III, pp 51-57

The question arises, first, why David says: 'to the hills' and not: 'to God', and, secondly, why he speaks of many hills rather than one hill, since plurality seems to support idolatry. My answer to the first question is that this and similar passages, such as: 'May he send help from his sanctuary' (Ps 20:3), are relevant to our theology which teaches that God wills to hear, be served (*coli*), sought, addressed in prayer, according to his word rather than our fancies. Thus he says in Exod 20:24: 'In whatever place I make a memorial of my name, I will come to you and bless you'. Hence all Jews, no matter in what place or region they were, were bound to the temple in Jerusalem, so that even if they prayed at home, they turned their eyes to Zion. Indeed the prayer of the good people in Babylon, far from the temple and Jerusalem, only pleased God because they sang and prayed to the God who dwelt in Mount Zion and had set

his tabernacle there. This was the reason why the prophets condemned the sacrifices and the rest of the services (*cultus*) which were instituted and performed in other places. It was not even enough to say: ‘O God, you who have brought your people from Egypt’ (1 Kings 12:28), for thus Jereboam too used to address God in the proper way and prayed perhaps even more fervently than those who were in Jerusalem and at the temple. Indeed hypocrisy and idolatry are usually much more fervent than true piety. Why then did such prayers not please God? It was because the other ‘hills’ had not been chosen and so did not have God’s word. God therefore did not will to hear prayers anywhere else except in that one place. They then should at least turn themselves with their eyes and heart to Jerusalem, even though they could not be bodily there. Thus, when Daniel prayed in Babylon he turned to Jerusalem, not only because Solomon had prayed in his prayer that, if those who had been sent into exile would turn to that place when they prayed, God would hear them and bring them back to the land (cf 1 Kings 8:48), but also because God simply willed to be addressed in prayer in the place which he himself had chosen so as to prevent all self-chosen and wayward acts of devotion.

In the New Testament we have been freed from attachment to external places, as Christ says: ‘The time will come when they will adore neither on this nor on that mountain’ (John 4:21). Our spiritual place is Jesus Christ, because God has determined that he will hear nothing except through this place, Christ. He says: ‘Whatever you ask the Father in my name (he will give it to you)’ (John 16:23), and (Hebrews 13:5 says): ‘through him then let us offer to God the sacrifices of our lips’. Outside Christ there is nothing for us to believe, hope or obtain. This is the chief part of our teaching which must therefore be firmly held. There are many who wish to please God outside Christ. So Arius, even though he robbed Christ of his divinity, still wished it to appear that he had the right God. Our monks believe that they please God with their vows and monastic observances. All these do not lift their eyes to the ‘hills’ to which David looked; they do not look to Christ alone. Nevertheless it must be established that Christ is our one and only place, our time and everything else required for prayer. Just as the Jews had no other sanctuary than the one in Jerusalem, so we have no other sanctuary than this one: Jesus, son of Mary.

This is how I usually answer the first question. David directs his prayer to the holy place set up in Jerusalem where there was the remembrance of God’s name which God had made for himself. Before then it was at Shiloh and Gibeon where the tabernacle had been. In these places he used to hear prayers and accept sacrifices. He did not however accept prayers and sacrifices in any other places, for in those places there was no remembrance of the Lord’s name which he had created for himself, but the remembrance of the name of idolatry which the faithless Jews had set up for themselves. But now in the New Testament the name of God dwells in Christ and the church which is one body with Christ. There we have the word of God, baptism, the Lord’s supper and the exercise of obedience to God.

My answer to the second question is that, even though David seems to prophesy about the church of the New Testament, in which there are many ‘hills’ rather than just one, for God in Christ hears the prayers of the faithful everywhere, and neither prayer nor the services (*cultus*) of the one God are bound to a particular external place, nevertheless it may be that the prophet uses the plural as a plural of majesty or else as a reference to the two mountains in the city of Jerusalem – Mount Zion towards the south and Mount Moriah, the site of the temple. Yet, as I have said previously, the plural draws a contrast, as if it were saying: ‘Idolaters run to their mountains, but I will remain close to my hills, that is in that unique temple hill which replaces all of them for me’ ...

I speak about the ‘hills’ which the eyes of the flesh do not see. For who can be so discerning and wise as to see that Mount Moriah is a holy mountain? The eyes see a pile of earth, but they do not see the holiness set in it because the Lord’s word is there, because God has said that he wills to dwell there, because he has made a remembrance of his name in that place, because he wills to be found there and not in heaven. For whoever wanders away from that place will not even be able to discover and take hold of God in heaven. In the same way, after God has revealed himself in the man Christ, we rightly believe and say that those who do not take hold of this man born of Mary cannot take hold of God simply. Even though they say they believe in God the creator of heaven and earth, they nevertheless in reality believe in an idol of their own hearts, since outside Christ there is no true God. Therefore David does not gaze at those hills of Jerusalem with the eyes of flesh, like a cow at its stable, but with the eyes of the Spirit, since God dwells there through his word. Hence these hills may not be physically large, but they are the Lord’s hills, so full of divinity that nothing of God can be found apart from these mountains and from the God who dwells there, just as we believe that Christ is ‘the throne of grace’ (Heb 4:16). Everything is found in him; outside him nothing is found.

3. Luther on Psalm 130 from WA 40.III, p 335-339

Right from the beginning you are reminded, as you have heard elsewhere from me, that the prophets, when they speak of God and address God, speak about their own God whose promises and service (*cultus*) they have. Otherwise you may think that access to God is open to us through our thoughts which we have of God apart from his word, just as the Turks (Muslims), Jews and papists speculate about God, either entirely without his word, or by changing his word from its true meaning to something imaginary or speculative which they themselves have devised. The prophets knew that, even though the true God was infinite in his nature, he nevertheless was enclosed in the mercy seat, to which he had bound himself by his word. So, even if they spoke of the God of heaven and creator of all things, they nevertheless had this even nearer, more certain sign of the true God, because they knew that he dwelt in Zion. Therefore those who prayed to God or preached about God did so as God had revealed himself to them in his word and promises. So, even if David seems to speak simply to God without any mention of the tabernacle or the promises, this must mean that he speaks to the kind of God who is present in his word and his service (*cultus*), just as we today should not think or speak of God otherwise than as the one who is in our true mercy seat, Christ. That is how Christ speaks to Philip: ‘He who sees me sees my Father’ (John 14:9). Also: ‘No-one comes to the Father but through me’ (John 14:6). When this is acknowledged, God can safely be adored and certainly be taken hold of as maker of heaven and earth. For, although his nature is incomprehensible and infinite apart from this revelation, it is finite and comprehensible in his word and the promises in which he has wrapped himself.

Thus, when the Jews bowed down (*adorantes*) to the ark, they adored the true God of heaven and earth, for by his word God indicated that he would be there and would hear the prayers of his people there. Likewise, when we look to Christ and adore him, we adore the true God, for God has revealed himself in Christ. So Christ too says: ‘Whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give to you’ (John 16:23). Those, therefore, who pray to God, without fixing their eyes and hearts on Christ, go astray; they do not come to God but are idolaters who adore the fancies of their own hearts rather than the true God, for God does not will to be sought and found, nor does he hear anyone, except in our mercy seat, Christ. If we then wish to discover God truly, know God rightly, and come certainly to him, we must look to Christ according to the proposition: ‘He who has seen me sees the Father’ (John 14:9), and: ‘If you have known

me, you have known the Father also' (John 14:7). Thus the word gathers up the wayward fancies of our hearts and fixes them on that one person who is the Christ, God and man, so that we realise that outside Christ there is no God, nor can he be found apart from Christ. He asks: 'Do you not believe that the Father is in me and I am in the Father?' (John 14:10).

It was ordained that the holy Jews also prayed in this way to the God who dwelt in Zion. Those who neglected that place, even if they used the same sacred things and the same words in prayer, committed idolatry for no other reason than that they acted contrary to this prescription, because God had commanded that he willed to be adored in Jerusalem. This then is the general rule which must be observed in all the psalms and the entire Scriptures: in the Old Testament there was no God except in Zion or at the site of the tabernacle, and all prayers were to be made to the God who was enthroned and dwelt between the cherubim. But when this temple was destroyed, God set up another temple which is Christ, where he wills to be sought, adored and served (coli). Outside this temple there is no God, but the devil is sought and found. There the minds of people either fall into despair, if they approach with a bad conscience, or fall into presumption through hypocrisy, like the idolatrous Jews and our own papists who presume much about their righteousness and God's favour.

The following and similar sentences from the psalms and the prophets are relevant here. David says: 'I have lifted my eyes to the hills' (Ps 121:1) and: 'God bless you from Zion' (Ps 128:5). Other verses which do not add an obvious reference to the place (of worship) or the temple should be taken in this sense, such as the verse: 'Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord' (Ps 130:1). David does not simply call on the Lord as the creator of heaven and earth, as the Turks also do, but on him who dwells in Zion. God's people have his promises and word that he wills to receive their votive offerings and hear (prayers) there ... God does not will to be sought in our thoughts. If we could do that, what would be the use of the word? Why then would God have revealed and designated the place (of worship) in the law (of Moses) and the person of Christ in the New Testament? Note what happens with our adversaries, the papists. They pray much, recite the psalms, and say the Lord's Prayer, but because they despise the word of Christ and even persecute it by force, their rank idolatry is hidden under the most beautiful words which they recite from the psalms. The same also happens with the Jews and Turks when they say they adore the living God, the creator of heaven and earth.

I therefore emphasise frequently and joyfully that outside Christ you should close your eyes and ears. You should say that you know no God except the one who was in Mary's womb and sucked at her breasts. Wherever that God Jesus Christ is, the whole of God is there with all divinity; there the Father and the Holy Spirit are found. Outside this Christ, God is nowhere and is not found anywhere. I know many monks who, since they believed that God could be grasped with human speculations, have fallen into the most serious dangers. Unless God had by a singular act of grace freed me from that temptation, I would have run headlong into destruction. It is, however, useful for life to learn caution from the dangers of others.