HERMENEUTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT’S USE OF THREE MESSIANIC PSALMS

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INTRODUCTION

There can be no doubt that the Old Testament (hereafter, OT) was critical to the early church. In the first sermon of its history, Peter quotes the OT no less than three times to prove his case, with two of those passages coming from Psalms. Their use as an apologetic tool goes back to Christ Himself, who said that the Scriptures taught it was “necessary that the [He] should suffer these things and enter into his glory” (Luke 24:26). Paul echoed that claim as he was “proving that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 9:22). Both common sense and a cursory reading of his sermons to the Jews in Acts show that he relied heavily on the OT to make his case.

The question, however, is whether Paul and the other NT writers were faithful in their use of the Psalms. Some interpreters today find no place for messianic predictions in the Hebrew Bible. Instead, they seek typological fulfillments or claim that the New Testament (hereafter, NT) writers (under divine inspiration) knowingly used their OT proof-texts out of context.

This paper seeks to challenge that view by briefly analyzing three psalms that play an important role in the NT apologetic for Christ: Psalm 16, 22, and 110. Those chapters will primarily be studied in their own contexts in attempt to understand them on their own terms. Only then can one determine how faithful (if at all) the NT writers were to the original meaning of their texts. Before, however, that analysis can take place, a few hermeneutical issues and presuppositions will be reviewed. The conclusion will argue that, at least in the case of these core texts, the NT writers followed normal hermeneutical procedures and that appeals to typology or spiritualization are unnecessary to account for their claims. To that end, a somewhat novel approach is suggested, in that it seems that fulfillment of theological principles in a literal way is the primary issue at stake. Literal fulfillment of details should only be considered in light of the broader principle. This approach has the added strength that it recognizes the NT writers as preachers as much as channels of divine revelation. As any preacher knows, application of timeless theological truths grounded in the text themselves lies at the heart of biblical exposition.

HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES

Several hermeneutical issues must be discussed before analyzing the psalms. First, one should be firmly committed to a historical-grammatical hermeneutic, for if one is allowed to spiritualize or allegorize Psalms, then in addition to having no objective meaning, they lose all apologetic value to the NT. Unfortunately, that commitment has not been held among many attempting to make sense of the NT use of the OT. The essence of their argument is that “through the progress of revelation and/or the fuller canonical interpretation of the Scriptures, one arrives at a more complete understanding of God’s original intent in a given OT text.”

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It is here proposed, then, that each psalm ought to be studied in its own context and fully understood as to its own message, and then that message ought to be compared with the NT authors' usage. Only then can one hope to discover their hermeneutical principles.

Second, given the above commitment to a historical-grammatical hermeneutic, one should also affirm “the classical position in evangelical hermeneutics . . . is that meaning resides in the intention of the author(s) as expressed in the written text.”

But if this is the case, then those positions that seek to establish a deeper meaning by separating the human author's intent from the Holy Spirit's intent are misguided. Considering this possibility, Radmacher asks,

While attempting to give due recognition to both the divine and human authors in Scripture, is it possible that we have separated them in an unnecessary and, perhaps, unscriptural way when we suggest that the divine author had understanding of the meaning of the text of which the human author of the text was ignorant?

That is, if meaning is rooted in authorial intent, then one cannot separate the human author's intention from the text's actual meaning, even by appealing to the authorial intent of the Holy Spirit. Such a view would relegate inspiration to little more than divine dictation that the author himself could not understand, and in that case, the entire enterprise of divine revelation is undermined! For if the author himself does not understand what he is writing, it seems obvious that his readers would have any less chance of understanding the message; but on such a view, that “message” is hardly revelatory to that reader. If that is true, then Christians reading their New Testaments have no defense against the charge that they themselves do not understand the Bible, as future revelation may show the divine intent was different from the human's.

A third issue relates to what makes a psalm messianic. It is common to make such assignments based on the psalm's NT usage, but that can hardly be appropriate since, again, that would destroy any apologetic value such “messianic” psalms might have had. Instead, psalms should be classified as messianic an an analysis of their original content suggests as much.

Fourth, one must allow for the possibility of genuinely predictive psalms. If the possibility is ruled out a priori, then any interpretation is better than predictive interpretations. This is not to say that there necessarily are predictive messianic psalms, but only that affirmation or denial of that point should be based on an inductive study of the text itself.

Fifth, one must decide the place of the Messiah in the Psalter. David himself says in his last words (2 Sam 23:1-5) that the Messiah is one of his favorite topics to write about. Given the

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3 Ibid., 46. Italics original.
4 Space precludes an important distinction between meaning as residing in authorial intent and meaning as residing in the words of the text itself. Suffice it to say, for the purposes of this paper, the two positions are close enough to be interchangeable, with one exception, which will be footnoted below.
6 Here, one can appeal to meaning as residing in the text rather than authorial intent. This seems to be what John does in John 11:50, where Caiphas' words were true, even if he failed to appreciate their true meaning. Yet even here, it is important to note that the meaning of the text itself cannot violate the human author's meaning, for then, the human author would be incorrect about the meaning of what he wrote. In that case, however, the above objection surfaces again.
above emphasis on authorial intent, this should weigh heavily on the mind of any exegete analyzing this issue.7

Finally Douglas Moo's question should be remembered at all times: “how can we accord complete truthfulness to writings that appear to misunderstand and misapply those texts from which they claim to derive the authority and rationale for their most basic claims and teaching?”8 That is, any interpretation one suggests for the psalms and the NT usage of them must have an objective degree of correspondence, for lacking that, it would either be the case that the psalmist was incorrect in the understanding of his own text, or (more likely) the NT author misunderstood his Bible. Neither option, for conservative theologians anyway, is acceptable.

Given these issues, attention will now be turned to the three psalms of this survey: Psalm 15, 22, and 110.

ANALYSIS OF SELECT MESSIANIC PSALMS

Psalm 16

Eugene Merrill classifies Psalm 16, correctly if not broadly, as a psalm of confidence.9 Its messianic status, however, is not so easy to determine. Its theological message is simply one of hope, as the opening words make clear: “Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.” David's request for preservation is rooted in his trust in Yahweh, and thus, the question turns on Yahweh's faithfulness to His covenant promises. Indeed, were it not for verse 10, there would be little reason to see the psalm as messianic at all.

Yet not only does the psalm contain verse 10, but, in fact, that verse appears to lie at the heart of the early Christian apologetic for Jesus as Messiah. It has a central place in Peter's first sermon (Acts 2:25-28), which suggests that this view may go back to Jesus' own interpretation of the psalm (Luke 24:26-27). Christians, then, certainly view it as messianic. The question is how it should be read on its own terms.

As already said, none of Psalm 16 is particularly messianic with exception to verse 10. Therefore, it deserves special attention. The ESV renders it, “For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.” The questions here are the identity of “your holy one” and whether this is speaking of resurrection or something else. With regard to the first, Kaiser insists that David had the Messiah in mind. He acknowledges that David sees himself as “the Holy One” (which, apart from the excellent arguments he offers, seems evident in the

7 See Rydennik, 168. The issue here is the meaning of הָלַי in 2 Sam 23:1. Rydennik suggests the following translation (emphasis original):

These are the last words of David:
the declaration of David son of Jesse,
the declaration of the man raised up concerning
the Messiah [Anointed One] of the God of Jacob,
and the Delightful One of the songs of Israel


parallelism “your Holy One” with “my soul”) but then adds the Holy One is “not David as a mere person but David as the recipient and conveyer of God's ancient but ever renewed promise.”

While Kaiser offers no support for this assertion, it seems to be a fair inference given the Davidic Covenant's promise that David's throne would last forever. So if the “Holy One” is not merely David personally, but rather concerns the Davidic king, then the text should be considered messianic in its own context.

This leads to the second question, which is what God promises the Davidic king. Commentators have long discussed whether verse 10 is a reference to David's hope in his resurrection or simply to his expectation of deliverance from some imminent danger. Tom Constable’s comments illustrate the difficulty of this question. He first says,

Evidently David had received a special revelation from the Lord that he would not die then, but would escape from whatever distress he was enduring (cf. v. 7a). . . . God would spare his life. Of course, David did not mean he would live forever, by bypassing death. He only meant that he would not die then. David was God's "holy one" (v. 10) in that God had set him apart for a special purpose and because his life was indeed God's, as he described earlier in this psalm.

Here Constable takes the view that abandonment to Sheol is not a reference to resurrection, but is rather David's statement of confidence that he would not soon die—that is, that he would be delivered from some present danger. Yet in very next line, Constable says, “The Apostle Paul referred to verse 10 as a messianic prophecy of Jesus Christ's resurrection (Acts 13:35). This is one of the few clear references to resurrection in the Old Testament (cf. Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2).” How Constable can say on one hand that David “had received a special revelation from the Lord that he would not die then” and that “this is one of the few clear references to resurrection in the Old Testament” is confusing to say the least!

A simple solution may lie in the fact that with exception to the first verse, there is no indication that David fears any particular danger at all. The word for “preserve” is שָמַר and simply means “be careful about” or “protect.” Rather than asking God to save him from a particular danger, David could simply be committing himself to God generally. If this is correct, then as David is not seeking deliverance from some particular danger, there is no reason to see verse 10 as God's promising deliverance from any particular danger. Instead, the verse seems more likely to be a hope of resurrection (an idea with which he was no doubt familiar). Thus, Kaiser's view can be substantiated, and the NT writers were justified in seeing Ps. 16:10 as predictive of Jesus' resurrection. For then the relevance of Peter's logic is clear: since David did see decay in the grave, it remained for a Davidic King to conquer death, which is precisely what Jesus had done.

11 Ibid., 224.
13 Ibid., emphasis added.
Psalm 22

Psalm 22 is one of the two most quoted psalms in all the New Testament. More interestingly, in all but one instances (Heb. 2:12), it is quoted with reference to Christ's passion. There is no doubt, then, that the NT authors considered the psalm not only messianic, but of utmost importance in understanding Jesus' crucifixion.

Before looking at those references, again an brief analysis of the psalm itself in its own context is in order. It was written by David and is as clear an example of a lament as any. A particular difficulty, however, is its historical context. Kaiser asks,

Is David also the innocent sufferer described in this psalm? David faced much suffering and opposition during his life. In that sense, then, much that is written here fits. But there is much in the language that exceeds anything that appears appropriate to David. For example, what events in David's life might provide the background of the abject status before all people mentioned in verse 6? When were his hands and feet pierced . . . and his garments divided among his detractors?

Kaiser's position, though historically in the mainstream among conservatives, has recently fallen out of favor even in evangelical circles, as exegetes are coming to argue that the psalm describes events in David's own life and that it is not intended to be predictive. The claim that the psalm is predictive, then, is rooted in the inability to attribute fully to David the suffering he describes.

It does appear that the problems Kaiser cites can be sufficiently understood to refer to David. For instance, when he first arrived in Gath he was hated by Saul and was deeply distrusted by the Philistine king Achish, so much so that David had to pretend to be insane to protect himself (1 Sam. 21:10-15). The words in verse 6 could well describe such a situation. Regarding his garments, Constable says, “Apparently his enemies were so sure that David would perish they were already invading his wardrobe and dividing his clothes among themselves.”

The only real difficulty is the piercing referred to in verse 16, which presents well-known textual problems. In short, the MT has “like a lion” rather than “they pierced,” as per the LXX, Vulgate, and Syriac texts. While the MT is awkward, it fits well the surrounding context and almost conveys a sense of panic, as if David were comparing his enemies to lions stalking him and suddenly pouncing, pinning him down: “Like a lion--My hands! My feet!”

Despite the vividness of the imagery, though, the evidence overwhelmingly favors the rendering, “They pierced.” First, the LXX, Vulgate, and Syriac’s witness are all (much) older than the Masoretic Text’s. More importantly, though, an ancient Hebrew text (1,000 years older

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18 Constable, 56.

19 Which would be consistent with ANE pictures that show a lion pinning its prey just so. See Gren, 291.
than the MT) was recently discovered with the same phrase. Moreover, that rendering explains rather well the MT's as a corruption.\textsuperscript{20} Finally, a standard canon is textual criticism is to take the more difficult reading, and while the MT's reading is certainly more \textit{grammatically} difficult, the LXX's rendering is far more \textit{conceptually} difficult. Christians quickly and easily see Christ's crucifixion in the words, “They pierced my hands and feet,” but those words coming from David, referring to his own suffering, are awkward at best. The language would certainly be figurative, but what it is figurative \textit{of} is unclear. Indeed, any reader prior to Christ's crucifixion (indeed, any reader trying to understand how the words could relate to David's suffering) would surely have regarded it as “an obscure figurative expression . . . perhaps attributed to poetic-license.”\textsuperscript{21}

None of this is to say that Kaiser's argument is without force, for even the suggestions above employ what might be an unusual degree of hyperbole. Hyperbole, however, is hardly absent from poetic literature, and thus it must be emphasized that the difficulty lies in just how hyperbolic the language actually is if referring to David's suffering. In any case, David himself sums up the message of the entire psalm in 22:24, “For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; and He had not hidden His face from him; but when he cried to Him, He heard.” This is where the proper Christological connection is rooted. The theological principle is that though the righteous may suffer for trusting Yahweh, He will always vindicate that trust in the end. If that were true of David, it would be even truer of the Messiah!

In light of that, while one can be rightly amazed at the degree to which Psalm 22 \textit{literally} describes Jesus' suffering, there is no necessary contradiction between denying that the psalm is essentially predictive and still affirming the NT authors' right to claim literal fulfillment in the details of the accounts. For the very degree of hyperbole should suggest to the reader that, though the language can and does apply to David, he should look for the passage to describe the suffering of \textit{all} the righteous who suffer for their faith. In light, then, of passages such as Ps 16 and Isa 53, the reader should be all the more prepared to see this suffering and vindication played out in the Messiah, and in \textit{that} case, while a literal fulfillment of the psalm's details are not necessary, they certainly confirm His identity. David’s word truly described Jesus' suffering.

\textit{Psalm 110}

The last psalm of this brief survey is 110, which is the clearest (if not only) example of a prophetic messianic psalm.\textsuperscript{22} Again, its historical origins are difficult to determine.\textsuperscript{23} More important is its prophetic significance. The first word (נְאֻם) makes it an oracle of God. Moreover, its place in the book of Psalms is important. It stands at the center of a unit of the first seven psalms of Book Five (107-113). The first three (107-109) are pleas for deliverance; the last three (111-113) are praises for deliverance. Binding them together in the middle is 110, which introduces the Messianic Deliverer.\textsuperscript{24} It is also interesting to note that this external

\begin{footnotes}
20 Gren, 288.
22 Gary Yates, “How Do the Psalms Speak of Jesus?” Liberty University (lecture, OBST 592, 2010), 8:04ff.
23 Some have suggested, for instance, that it was written when David abdicated his throne and Solomon took his place, and thus, “my lord” refers historically and primarily to Solomon, but no consensus has emerged. Constable, 198-99.
24 Rydelink, 71.
\end{footnotes}
organization parallels the chapter’s internal structure. The first three verses present the Messiah as a divine king, who is to wait “until I [Yahweh] make your enemies your footstool” (v. 1).

The last three present the Messiah as a warrior, victorious over his enemies. The central verse (v. 4) presents Messiah as an eternal priest. Thus, it seems the structure of Psalms 107-113 centers on Israel’s deliverance by her eternal Priest-King.

Almost all of the verses describing the Priest-King are important. If David wrote the psalm, as the superscription says, then Jesus’ argument from Matt. 22:41-46 is especially cogent, for David’s “Lord” could only be a Davidic King—the Messiah. If the LXX’ rendering of 110:3 is accepted (as it should be), which speaks of God begetting David's Lord, then that relationship is strengthened even more. The important point is that David could not be writing about himself, making it highly likely he intended the psalm to be prophetic.

Verse 4 strengthens that case. Neither David nor Solomon were priests, so neither could be the fulfillment of this verse. Finally, no Israelite King ever achieved the universal dominion described in the last three verses and thus still awaits fulfillment. For all these reasons, Psalm 110 has been long been considered a direct prediction of the Messiah.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the NT authors appealed so frequently to this chapter. Indeed, as already noted, Jesus himself depended on it, and it surely had a place in His post-resurrection exposition of the Hebrew Bible to His disciples. Moreover, given the nature of this psalm, it is clear that every such usage constitutes a direct application and requires no typological fulfillment of any kind. That is, the hermeneutical commitments of the NT authors, particularly in their application of this passage, would have fit easily within a historical-grammatical method of interpretation.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis of Psalms 16, 22, and 110 has attempted to examine them in their own contexts in accordance with the hermeneutical issues laid out at the beginning of this study. From this analysis, it appears that readers are amply justified in considering each a messianic psalm—and that without recourse to NT citations. That the NT cites each of these regularly is, of course, no surprise, given their messianic status. Moreover, it is admitted that each of these were chosen for study precisely for their dominance in NT literature. The point—which bears great hermeneutical importance—is that their status can be verified on their own terms.

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25 This is unclear in most English translations. The key to this section comes in a variant reading of the end of verse three. Some scholars find the 110:3c to be meaningless and unintelligible. The LXX’ rendering “from the womb of the dawn, I have begotten you,” is a clear reference to Ps 2 and fits easily into the immediate context. See Rydellink, 174-75.
26 Ibid.
27 Though some have argued that David functioned like a priest, he was still not a priest in and of himself. See Rydelink, 176-178 for a detailed discussion on this issue.
This suggests that the NT writers did not impute a messianic status on these psalms that was foreign to them in their original composition, which in turn argues that the NT writers were faithful in their application of these passages to Jesus in defense of messianic claims about Him.

Moreover, this analysis has suggested that typology need not figure as prominently in the exegesis of the psalms as perhaps has been suggested. Psalm 110 is predictive, and as such, NT writers could directly apply its claims to Jesus Christ, just as they could with any other direct messianic prediction (e.g., Micah 5:2, etc.). More interesting is that Psalms 16 and 22 do not need to be read typologically, either. Instead, it appears that the NT writers were following a method of interpretation advanced by evangelicals today. J. Daniel Hays has argued for a method he calls “principlism,” whereby an analysis of a passage yields a timeless theological truth, and that truth becomes the basis for preaching and application. Just so, the general principle of Psalm 16 is that God will preserve His chosen vessels—especially the Davidic King—a truth that cannot be more greatly fulfilled that in the resurrection of Christ. Likewise, Psalm 22 promises vindication to those who are mocked and suffer for their faith. Again, Christ’s resurrection fulfills this is a truth in the grandest possible sense.

This is not to suggest that the fulfillment of the details of the passages is accidental, unnecessary, and that they therefore are not prophetic. If, however, one recognizes that the fulfillment of the general principle in its highest fashion is a true fulfillment of the prophetic word, then one should not at all be surprised to see many of the details of that word fulfilled literally, too. Indeed, it is upon retrospection that consideration of the fulfillment of those details confirms the fulfillment of the principle itself.

Finally, this is not to suggest that typology is completely absent from the NT writer’s repertoire. Again, such a question must be answered by an inductive study of each text. It is only to say that the NT writers were faithful to the historical-grammatical meaning of the original messianic psalms. As such, they applied them properly to Christ in a way that respected the original meaning of the text, which maintained their apologetic value. Whether this approach is used with other messianic psalms or other OT passages generally, and whether this method is still available to modern exegetes of the OT in light of the revelation of Christ are questions that this study suggests but cannot answer.


30 This view has another strength to commend it: it would suggest a good reason that typology has been so often appealed to as a manner of interpretation. For consideration of the details apart from the theological principle’s fulfillment could be nothing other than typological!
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


