


The Messiah and the Psalms:

Preaching Christ from All the Psalms

Richard P. Belcher, Jr.

MENTOR



Dedicated to my wife

Lu
who is a gift from the LORD

Proverbs 19:14

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Preface

Seeing more of the majesty of Christ in the pages of Scripture should be an encouragement to God's people and should lead to praise and thanksgiving. The basic thesis of this book is that all the psalms have a relationship to the person and/or work of Christ, not just the traditional Messianic psalms. The goal is not to find Christ in every verse, but to understand how the major concepts and ideas in the Old Testament are foundational for understanding the person and work of Christ. The justification for this approach is laid out in Chapters 1–3. The benefit of this approach follows in the rest of the book. Different types of psalms are examined to show how those psalms relate to Christ and what those psalms might teach us about Christ. The basic structure of a psalm, its use of key concepts and themes, and its basic message in its Old Testament setting are first analyzed as a foundation for making connections to Christ. It is important for the reader to have a Bible open to the psalm that is being discussed, and then to be willing to explore the New Testament connections that are brought out in relationship to Christ. Most technical matters are dealt with in the notes.



Unless otherwise stated, the quotations of Scripture come from the English Standard Version (ESV). As Hebrew students quickly realize, many times the Hebrew verses are off by a verse or two in comparison with the English verses. The Hebrew includes the title of the Psalm as the first verse. The English versification is followed except where specific comment may be made on a Hebrew word. The verse in the Hebrew will always follow in brackets the verse in the English. For example, Psalm 8:2 [3] means that verse 2 is the English verse and verse 3 is the Hebrew verse. There is very limited discussion of Hebrew words, but when the Hebrew is commented on, English transliteration is always given. Most of the transliteration is straightforward, but the lay person may want to take note of the following pronunciations: *w* = *v* (as in vine); *h* = *ch* (as in Bach); *t* = *t* (as in tall); *š* = *ts* (as in nets); *ś* and *s* = *s* (as in set); *š* = *sh* (as in shine); *ā* and *a* = *a* (as in father); *ē* = *ey* (as in they); *î* and *i* = *e* (as in she); *ô* and *ō* = *o* (as in row). Also, behind the covenant name LORD stands the Hebrew *yhwh* (יהוה), a name so sacred the Jewish people would not pronounce it. The older pronunciation is Jehovah, but more recent scholars use Yahweh. This name for God becomes prominent in the Exodus event. Yahweh is the covenant name that reminds the people of his saving power to deliver. Many times I will use both to remind the reader of the connection – LORD (Yahweh) – but sometimes I may only use one or the other.

I would like to thank Christian Focus for the opportunity to pursue this topic and for their patience while I finished the project. I was able to complete the basic approach and structure of the book while on sabbatical several years ago. Thanks also to the Board of Reformed Theological Seminary for the sabbatical and for providing a great place to teach.

Part of the joy of teaching at RTS Charlotte is the good relationship among the faculty members. I would especially like to thank my colleagues Dr. Robert J. Cara and Dr. Michael J. Kruger for their encouragement and stimulating discussions concerning Scripture, hermeneutics, and theology (yes Jill, it is ‘work’ and we do love it!!). Dr. Cara has made several helpful suggestions along

the way. I would also like to thank Dr. Tremper Longman III, who has greatly influenced my approach to the psalms. However, I take full responsibility for any shortcomings in the book.

I am grateful to members of Christ Ridge Church who regularly prayed for this book to be completed, especially Grady and Carol Hope.

I thank my parents for the good foundation they laid for me in the Christian faith. As a 'preacher's kid' I never felt like I lived in a glass bowl or was held to a higher standard than others.

I especially thank my wife Lu, to whom this book is dedicated. Without her tireless efforts on behalf of our family I would not be where I am today, and I would not have been able to finish this book. Thank you for your Christ-like spirit.

I pray that this book will help others to see more of the majesty of Christ in the Psalms.

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ANE	Ancient Near East
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>BibSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
chap	chapter
chaps	chapters
diss.	dissertation
ed.	editor
eds.	editors
ESV	English Standard Version
ff	following
FOTL	Forms of Old Testament Literature
<i>IBS</i>	<i>Irish Biblical Studies</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Int	Interpretation
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
n.	note (footnote)
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCB	New Century Bible
n.d.	no date
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDOTTE	New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
NKJV	New Kings James Version
ns	new series
NT	New Testament
NTC	New Testament Commentary
Num	Numbers
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
pft	perfect
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>



trans.	translator
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
vol.	volume
vols.	volumes
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
v	verse
vv	verses
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>





Chapter 1

Key Issues in Interpreting the Psalms

There has always been debate concerning which psalms are Messianic. What is it that makes a psalm Messianic? Are there certain concepts that set some psalms apart as Messianic? Must a Messianic psalm have a predictive element in it that the New Testament recognizes is a reference to Jesus Christ? What relevance do Messianic psalms have to their own historical context? Certain psalms have been historically recognized as Messianic because they speak more directly of Christ and are used as such in the New Testament (Pss. 2, 16, 22, 110), but does that mean that other psalms do not have any relationship to Christ?

The significance of these questions can be seen in how commentators have dealt with Psalm 1. Psalm 1 sets forth the blessedness of 'the man'¹ who avoids wickedness and lives a fruitful life because he meditates on the law of God. Such a man is contrasted with the wicked, who are unstable and have no future. Nothing distinctly Messianic is found in this psalm. There is no mention of a king or a kingdom (as Pss. 2 and 110) and there is nothing that ties the psalm directly to the ministry or suffering of Jesus Christ (as Ps. 22). Calvin's exposition of this



psalm focuses entirely on the blessedness of God's devout servants, with no mention of Christ.² Luther, on the other hand, begins by noting that the 'first psalm speaks literally concerning Christ'. The blessed man is Christ, who did not consent to the design of the Jews (walked not in the counsel of the ungodly).³ An analysis of these two approaches raises important issues for interpreting the psalms, especially the traditional Messianic psalms.

Calvin's commentaries are an extraordinary testimony to sober, historical exegesis.⁴ His first concern is to try to understand the Old Testament passage in its historical context. Calvin emphasizes the human author and is in constant search for the intention of the human author.⁵ This emphasis keeps Calvin from jumping to Christ before he has explored the meaning of the passage in its original Old Testament setting. He is thus very reserved at times in making direct application to Christ from the psalms. Even in psalms that are more traditionally Messianic, he seeks to understand the psalm in reference to David and the Old Testament kingdom before examining how it relates to Christ. Thus at the beginning of Psalm 72 Calvin sets forth this caution:

Those who would interpret it simply as a prophecy of the kingdom of Christ, seem to put a construction upon the words which do violence to them; and then we must always beware of giving the Jews occasion of making an outcry, as if it were our purpose, sophistically, to apply to Christ those things that do not directly apply to him.⁶

Even for Psalm 22, which opens with the cry that Jesus uttered on the cross (Matt. 27:46), Calvin wants to speak first of how this psalm and the distress expressed in the psalm relates to David.⁷ Calvin's emphasis on the intention of the human author and the historical situation limits the number of psalms that he considers Messianic.⁸ Yet the benefit of his emphasis on the historical situation and the intention of the human author cannot be overestimated as foundational to the interpretation of Scripture.

Although Calvin stresses the human author and the historical situation, he does recognize another dimension to the psalms. The psalms do speak of the future coming of the Messiah and his kingdom. In one psalm at least, there is a direct reference to Christ without any attention given to the historical situation. In the introduction to Psalm 110 Calvin comments:

In this psalm David sets forth the perpetuity of Christ's reign, and the eternity of his priesthood . . . Having the testimony of Christ that this psalm was penned in reference to himself, we need not apply to any other quarter for the corroboration of this statement . . . the truths here stated relate neither to David nor to any other person than the Mediator alone.⁹

Here Calvin sounds very much like Luther in Psalm 1 where Luther takes the man in Psalm 1 to be a direct reference to Christ.

It is more common, however, for Calvin to understand a psalm in reference to David and his kingdom, but then to recognize that what is said about David and his kingdom cannot be fulfilled except in Jesus Christ. For example, the submission to the king in Psalm 47:1 does not fit either David or Solomon's reign:

Many nations were tributary to David, and to his son Solomon, but while they were so, they ceased not at the time, to murmur and bore impatiently the yoke which was imposed upon them . . . it follows that this language is applicable only to the kingdom of Christ.¹⁰

Here David and his kingdom are a type of Christ and his kingdom. In these situations the words of the psalm point beyond the historical situation to the coming of the Messiah. Thus Calvin recognizes that something more than historical interpretation is appropriate.¹¹ Calvin understands that such a typological reference is related to the divine author of Scripture as he refers repeatedly in Psalm 47 to the 'inspired writer' and stresses the 'design of the Holy Spirit'.¹² Although Calvin emphasizes the human author and the meaning of a text in its historical situation, he also recognizes

that the meaning of a text may go beyond the historical situation because of the divine author of Scripture.

Luther's approach to the Psalms is best understood in his interaction with the interpretive questions of his day. Thomas Aquinas had developed the four-fold sense of Scripture with an emphasis on the literal sense as foundational to the other senses. The allegorical sense (the spiritual meaning), the tropological sense (the moral meaning), and the anagogical sense (the eschatological meaning) are all rooted in the literal sense.¹³ Luther develops the literal sense in his approach to interpreting Scripture, although he gives recognition to the other senses, especially in his early comments on the Psalms. In his interpretation of Psalm 1:1 he sets forth the literal sense that Jesus Christ made no concessions to the designs of the Jews. The allegorical sense is related to the church, which means that the holy church did not agree to these evil designs of the Jews against Christ. There is also a tropological, or moral sense, which means that the spirit of man should not give in to the persuasions of the flesh and the ungodly strivings of the body.¹⁴ Although Luther's early comments on the Psalter followed this pattern, he also laid the foundation for the abolishment of this four-fold approach by his emphasis on Christ as the literal sense. If Christ is the literal sense, then there is no need to find Christ in some spiritual or allegorical sense in the Old Testament. Luther argued that the whole Bible is about Christ and that Christ is the true spiritual sense of Scripture, and that sense is communicated through the historical character of the text.¹⁵ By emphasizing that the literal sense of a psalm speaks of Christ, Luther laid the foundation for the abolishment of the four-fold sense of Scripture and the need for allegory to see Christ in the Old Testament.¹⁶

This raises an important question: If the whole Bible is about Christ, as Jesus himself in Luke 24:44 seems to say, then how do psalms that are not directly Messianic relate to Christ? Is it appropriate to jump directly from the psalms to Christ, as Luther does when he makes the man in Psalm 1:1 to refer to Jesus Christ?

More recent developments in psalm study fill in the gap between Calvin's historical emphasis and Luther's Christological

emphasis, especially as they relate to the identification of ‘the man’ in Psalm 1. There has been a movement toward a literary approach to the psalms that emphasizes the importance of the editing and structure of the Psalms. The structure of the Psalms has significance for the meaning of individual psalms and reflects the concerns of those who edited the Psalter. Although a number of different proposals set forth various reasons for the structure of the Psalms,¹⁷ there is general agreement that the Psalms are divided into five books,¹⁸ that Psalms 1 and 2 serve as an introduction to the Psalter, and that Psalms 146–150 act as a conclusion.¹⁹ Many also believe that the Psalter came into existence over a period of time, with the first three books being earlier than books IV and V.²⁰ The structure of the Psalter seems related to kingship and the Davidic covenant. Psalms near the seams of the first three books deal with the king. Psalm 2 stands at the beginning of the Psalter and emphasizes that the king is God’s son. Psalm 72, which concludes Book II, is a royal psalm which suggests that the promise of God to David is good for Solomon and for all other descendants of the throne. It focuses on the righteous government expected of the king. Book III, however, ends with Psalm 89, which rehearses the promises of the Davidic covenant (vv. 1-38), but concludes with questions related to the effectiveness of the covenant because the covenant with David seems to have failed (vv. 39-52). Books IV and V may be an answer to the questions raised at the end of Psalm 89. Book IV opens with the Mosaic Psalm 90, taking Israel back to her foundations, and is followed by Psalm 91, one of the boldest expressions of confidence in the Scriptures. There then follows a group of psalms (93–100) that stress the reign of the LORD (Yahweh) . Even if the monarchy is in trouble (Psalm 89) Yahweh reigns as their king.²¹ Book IV ends with the plea of Psalm 106:47: ‘save us... and gather us from among the nations.’ Book V begins with Psalm 107, a psalm of thanksgiving offered to the LORD for gathering his people from the lands of exile, no doubt a response to Psalm 106. Book V then has several groupings of psalms that are significant. There are two groups of Davidic psalms that appear near the beginning and the end of Book V: 108–110

and 138–145. These psalms ultimately show the triumph of the Davidic king and set forth a model of the type of king God's people need.²² Then there are two groupings of psalms that are connected to the liturgy of Israel. Psalms 113–118 are the Egyptian Hallel psalms which focus on the theme of deliverance and the Exodus event. They may be related to the Passover celebration.²³ The other group is Psalms 120–134, sometimes called the Songs of Ascents, which are pilgrim psalms sung by people on their way to the feasts at Jerusalem. The focus is on Jerusalem (122), the temple (127), and David (132), with a climax reached in Psalms 135–136 where the LORD is proclaimed as the universal king. At the very heart of Book V is Psalm 119, emphasizing the importance of the law for the community. The final editing of the Psalter reflects the concerns of the post-exilic community related to the promises of the Davidic covenant.²⁴ Because the structure of the Psalter is concerned with the king and the promises of the Davidic covenant, it has Messianic implications.

So, how should we understand 'the man' in Psalm 1? To whom does 'the man' refer? It is hard to determine the origin of Psalm 1 and whether it was composed specifically to serve as an introduction to the Psalter to emphasize the need to meditate on the psalms as Torah (God's instructions).²⁵ It is appropriate to conclude that 'the man' who is blessed because he meditates on the law of God refers to any Israelite. Calvin's analysis, which emphasizes the human author and the historical situation, stresses this meaning for the psalm. He makes no connection to Christ.

However, Psalm 1 did become a part of the Psalter and within that context takes on fuller meaning. Book I has a strong Davidic flavor. All the psalms in Book I, except 1–2, 10, and 33, are attributed to David. Psalm 2 is a psalm that explicitly deals with royal themes. Since Book 1 has a strong Davidic emphasis, one must entertain the possibility that 'the man' of Psalm 1 is a reference to the Davidic king.²⁶ Without denying that Psalm 1 applies to common Israelites, the emphasis on meditating on the law of God for a fruitful life coincides well with the emphasis that the king is to keep a copy of the law with him and read it

all the days of his life (Deut. 17:19). Thus if 'the man' in Psalm 1 includes the king, it is a small step to see that 'the man' in Psalm 1 is finally fulfilled in the righteous king, Jesus Christ. A foundation is thus laid for Luther's jump from 'the man' in Psalm 1 to Jesus Christ.

The basis for the development of meaning from 'the man' to any Israelite, to the Davidic king, to Jesus Christ is found in the divine author, who is necessary for a text to have meaning beyond the immediate historical situation.²⁷ The unfolding of progressive revelation and the unity of the message of Scripture is rooted in the divine author. Since the fullness of revelation did not come until Christ, any Old Testament passage or concept may develop in the unfolding of progressive revelation and the fullness of revelation in Christ. There is great overlap in meaning between the divine author and the human author, but the human author may not fully comprehend the full meaning of his writing because he stands at a point before the completed revelation in Christ.²⁸

Although some are concerned that bringing in a divine author in relationship to the meaning of a text opens the door to allegory, or making an Old Testament text say anything that one wants,²⁹ such fears can be adequately addressed. There are proper limits or controls on the meaning of the text so that an appeal to the divine author in light of the fullness of revelation is not an open door for chaos in meaning.³⁰ The meaning of a psalm in its original context, whether historical or literary, is foundational for not only understanding the psalm, but also for making correct connections to Christ. One should not bypass the meaning in the original context. But how the concepts of a psalm develop in later revelation is also important. It is thus appropriate to contemplate the meaning of a psalm, or any other Old Testament text, in light of the Old Testament canon. And finally, it is appropriate to analyze the meaning of a psalm in light of the coming of Christ, not because Christ is to be found in every verse of the Old Testament, but because Christ is the goal toward which the Old Testament moves.³¹ The major message of the Old Testament, its concepts and ideas, find their fulfillment in Christ.



The Messiah and the Psalms

The next chapter is a more technical chapter that defines the different approaches to the Messianic psalms and reviews the concept of the Messiah in the Psalms. One could skip Chapter 2 and go directly to Chapter 3, where the foundation for the basic thesis of this book is laid out. However, it might be helpful to read ‘The Historical Grammatical Approach’ in Chapter 2 as background to the Christological Approach that is developed in Chapter 3.

