

## David and the Psalms: Four Avenues

[Notes prepared for Christ the King Anglican Church, by interim rector Prof. Glen Taylor.<sup>1</sup>]

*“The psalm titles . . . [provide] ways of relating the psalms to the lives of those who lived in the face of threats from enemies within and without and from their own sin and who sought to conduct their lives according to the way of David [and of Jesus the Messiah.]*  
(Mays, *The LORD Reigns*, 95, bracketed contents mine.)

David is heard in the Psalter in four important ways. 1. In the ascription of some psalms to settings in his life story in the Books of Samuel [see 1 below]. 2. In the simple attribution of many psalms “concerning David” [see 2 below]. 3) In what is said about David in the text of a few psalms [3 below]. 4. In the message implied by the ordering and placement of five groupings of Davidic Psalms within the Psalter (3-41; 51-71, 86; 101-103; 108-110; 138-145)<sup>2</sup>

Each of these four categories is discussed below, only the first three of which will be referenced in my talk today.

### 1. TWELVE<sup>3</sup> CASES WHERE THE PSALMS ARE LINKED TO A HISTORICAL EVENT IN THE LIFE OF KING DAVID

1. Psalm 3: “When he fled from his son Absalom.”<sup>4</sup>
2. \*Psalm 18 (=2 Samuel 22): “He sang to the Lord the words of this song when the lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul.”<sup>5</sup>
3. Psalm 34, “When he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who drove him away and he left.”<sup>6</sup>
4. Psalm 51, “When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.”<sup>7</sup>
5. Psalm 52, “When Doeg the Edomite had gone to Saul and told him, ‘David has gone to the house of Ahimelech.’”<sup>8</sup>
6. Psalm 54, “When the Ziphites had gone to Saul and said, ‘Is David not among us?’”<sup>9</sup>
7. Psalm 56, “When the Philistines had seized him in Gath.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I owe much of the content here to an essay by J.L. Mays in his book *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms*.

<sup>2</sup> I owe some wording here to J. L. Mays.

<sup>3</sup> Or thirteen if we include Psalm 7, the title of which follows a different pattern from the others.

<sup>4</sup> Compare 2 Sam 15:13-17.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding enemies, see, for example, 2 Sam 8:1-14; regarding Saul as David’s enemy, see 1 Sam 18-31, esp. 18:9-11; 19:2, 10-11, 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> Compare 1 Sam 21:10-15.

<sup>7</sup> Compare 2 Sam 11.

<sup>8</sup> Compare 1 Sam 22:6-23.

<sup>9</sup> Compare 1 Sam 23:19; 26:11.

<sup>10</sup> Probably compare 1 Sam 21:1-15, esp. 10ff.

8. Psalm 57, "When he fled from Saul into the cave."<sup>11</sup>
9. Psalm 59, "When Saul had sent men to David's house in order to kill him."<sup>12</sup>
10. Psalm 60, "When he fought Aram Naharaim and Aram Zobah, and when Joab returned and struck down twelve thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt."<sup>13</sup>
11. Psalm 63, "When he was in the desert of Judah."<sup>14</sup>
12. Psalm 142, "When he was in the cave."<sup>15</sup>

Assessment:

"When read as songs sung by David on certain occasions of his career, these psalms cumulatively identify and elaborate one dimension of his story. They all concern situations of need and the deliverance of the LORD as its resolution. They are either prayers for salvation or praise for salvation from trouble or songs of trust on the part of one who must and can live in the face of trouble in reliance on God . . .

This common focus on the Lord's salvation as the hope of prayer and the basis of trust points to the importance of the setting given to Psalm 18. Instead of identifying one particular occasion, the title of Psalm 18 is a comprehensive summary composed in a different form from the others. David said this Psalm "in the time when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul." This title identifies the theme of the entire group, and points to the kind of setting in the story of David in Samuel that goes with the other psalms. Of course, it is of great importance that Psalm 18 is the only song in the book of Psalms that also appears in the story of David. This makes it the specific literary evidence for how the relationship between the two [David in Psalms and in Samuel] seems to be understood.

The David in whom those who gave these settings to the twelve psalms are interested is the David whose story is woven out of incidents of trouble, danger from foes within the community and from enemies outside, and finally, from his own transgression. But in all, he trod the way of prayer and trust. He was saved. In this pattern of experience, repeated so often in the story when appropriate psalms are related to his crises, he becomes a model and guide for those who study the psalms and sing them in worship. The role of the psalms as the key to his life and the truth about it gives the congregation assurance that the practice of life according to these psalms will be the one true way for their life. The psalm titles . . . are . . . hermeneutical ways of relating the psalms to the lives of those who lived in the face of threats from enemies within and without and from their own sin and who sought to conduct their lives according to the way of David. (Mays, *The LORD Reigns*, 95)

## 2. THE SIMPLE ATTRIBUTION OF MANY PSALMS "TO DAVID"

There are sixty-one such cases in the Old Testament. Mays: "whatever meaning these simple ascriptions may have had at one time, they are now interpreted in the context of the longer titles that point to David's story. These psalms too can be studied and sung with the same assumptions as the psalms with specific settings.

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<sup>11</sup> Compare 1 Sam 22:1-5/1 Sam 24.

<sup>12</sup> Compare 1 Sam. 19:11-17.

<sup>13</sup> Compare 2 Sam 8 and likely also 1 Chron 18.

<sup>14</sup> David was in the wilderness of Judah fleeing Saul in 1 Sam 19-31; the reference to "the king" in v. 11 suggests a link more specifically with his son Absalom's coup (2 Sam 15-17, especially 15:23-26.)

<sup>15</sup> Compare 1 Sam 22:1-5/1 Sam 24.

Without the users' having to settle the question of just where they fit in the David story, they offer words to guide thought and worship that hold their users in continuity with David and in relation to David's God.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. WHERE DAVID IS REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT OF THE PSALMS THEMSELVES

Such are in Pss 18:50; 78:70; 89:3, 20, 35, 49; 132:1, 10-22, 17; 144:10 (see 122:5).

Mays' assessment: "This short list is . . . of great importance because it is here that we learn from the psalter who the David of the titles in the psalms is. The David in the psalms is the king of the LORD, the servant of the LORD, the chosen one, the anointed one (messiah), with whom the LORD has made covenant by solemn oath that his dynasty will last forever. The future of all those related to God through David is based on God's sworn promise to David. A very specific sector out of the books of Samuel is reflected in these psalms: the story about Samuel's anointing the shepherd boy (Ps. 78 and 1 Sam. 16), the account of David's introduction of the Ark into Jerusalem (Ps. 132 and 2 Sam. 6), and God's covenant with David (Ps. 89 and 132, and 2 Sam. 7). These are, of course, the stories that give the narrative basis for David's role in the way of the Lord with Israel and the world.

These few texts furnish the intertextual code for reading other songs in which David is not mentioned. When these titles appear in psalms that do not name David, they furnish the identification for the speaker or subject of the psalm. The 'messiah' or 'the king' or God's 'servant' are textual directions to think of David. When the psalms attributed to David are read in light of what is said in the psalms about him, a messianic construal is cast over the collection. It was inevitable that the psalms would be read in the light of promises of a future Davidic Messiah. The role of Psalm 2 as introduction to the canonical book is only one piece of evidence that prophecy has become a rubric in terms of which all the psalms may be read." (Mays, 96.)

### 4. THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF GROUPING THE DAVIDIC PSALMS INTO A COLLECTION OF FIVE WITHIN THE BOOK OF PSALMS

(After Peter C. Ho on The Design of the Five Davidic Collections [DCs] in the Psalms (DC 1=Pss 3-41 [Book I], DC 2=Pss 51-71, 86 [Books II-III], DC 3=Pss 101-103 [Book IV], DC 4=Pss 108-110; DC 5=Pss 138-145 [Book V])

Review:

1. The Psalms are divided into five Books: Book 1 (Psalms 1-41), II (Psalms 42-72), III (Psalms 73-89), IV (Psalms 90-106) and V (Psalms 107-150)

What's new:

- a. The Five Books of the Psalms above can be placed into three main groups:  
Group 1 (Book I)                      Group 2 (Books II-III)                      Group 3 (Books IV-V)

- b. There are five "Davidic Collections" [DCs], collections of Psalms "concerning David."

[N.B. These are different from the five books of the Psalms as a whole.]

Davidic Collection I (Psalms 3-41), II (Psalms 51-71, 86), III (Psalms 101-103), IV (Psalms 108-110), V (Psalms 138-145). DC I is in Group 1, DCs II and III in Group 2, and DCs IV and V in Group 3.

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<sup>16</sup> Mays continues: "It was some such conviction that gave steady impetus after the canonical Psalter was fixed to the growth of the Davidic claim by the addition of fourteen psalms that do not have the attribution in the Hebrew Bible. When we notice that the title attribution was given even to Psalm 137 and that the Greek text is added to . . . Psalm 96 'of David when the house was built after the captivity,' it is apparent that these editors were not thinking historically. Such practices make it very clear that what is at work in the latter history of the Davidic [to David'] attributions is some kind of canonical ordering and defining that proceeds oblivious of any sort of historical or autobiographical concerns." (95.)

As Ho points out (p. 262), just as the five-book structure of the Book of Psalms invokes the authority of Moses, it is reasonable to assume that “five-collection” status of psalms attributed to David is meant to put David on a par with Moses.<sup>17</sup>

Ho summarizes his understanding of the structure of, and development within these five “DCs” as follows: It begins in DC I with Yahweh’s kingship (Pss 8-9), finds at the center the establishment of David’s kingship as well as the Temple (Pss 18-21, 29-30), and ends with David’s distress and making supplication (Ps 38). In DC II (51-71, 86), David’s fall begins with his sin involving Bathsheba (Ps 51; he nonetheless repents), the center finds his life threatened (Pss 56-64) and ends with David on the brink of death and making supplication (Pss 71, 86).

(Thus far, we see linear progression from a positive situation with David’s kingship and the Temple, but it changes due to David’s sin (Ps 51) (though his sacrifice is accepted); kingship is foreseen as being turned over to a Solomonic [post-David] king [Ps 72])

DC III (101-103) notes at the beginning an ideal human David (101), the center finds an afflicted figure (Ps 102) and the end sees David as Song Leader (Ps 103—note its similarities with Ps 145). DC IV (108-110) begins with a victorious Davidic king entering Zion (108), at the center finds an afflicted and condemned Davidic figure (109), and ends with a vindicated victorious David who rules from Zion (110).

(We see development from DCs I & II to the point that an ideal Davidic figure is now pictured, one who is nonetheless condemned and later vindicated, and one who is a king-priest.)

DC V (138-145) begins by affirming Yahweh’s kingship, is centered with a reminder of David’s distress and supplications (140-43)—here at a point where David’s identity and mission is increasingly associated with that of his godly-covenanter followers--; and ends where the David figure passes his kingship forward to that of Yahweh (145). [I would add also that in 145 the Davidic king “teaches” us and leads us into eschatological praise.]

(Progression in the DC continues to be evident in that the ideal Davidic king turns over kingship to Yahweh in the end.)

Ho describes the progression I have outlined in parentheses above in his own words as follows:

“The development begins with the establishment of David’s kingship in DC-I [Davidic Collection I] followed by its fall in DC-II. At the end of DC-II, the Davidic kingship is turned over prophetically to a Solomonic-messianic figure [Ps 72]. Then, the Davidic characterization shifts positively in DC-III, where a blameless and righteous Davidic king arises. Both DC-III and IV explicate and deepen the portrait of this Davidic king. And the end of DC-V, the Davidic kingship is now turned over to YHWH. Between the kingships of the historical David (DC-I and II) and YHWH (end DC-V), the kingship of an ideal messianic priest-king is pictured both as a condemned figure and vindicated ruler from Zion.” (Ho, Design, 256, emphasis mine.)

Ho concludes:

“Our study of the five D[avidic] C[ollection]s has demonstrated that the Davidic characterization of the Psalter is not haphazard. There are clear structural and thematic developments. Specifically, its telos [end-point] highlights an ideal and victorious Davidic king who would usher in an era of permanent social bliss. It is possible to argue that the Psalter, by its composition, arrangement, and trajectory, has a Messianic and eschatological program. The Psalter is, in other words, a reception of the Davidic Covenant.” (Ho, Design of the Psalter, 257.)

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<sup>17</sup> “The structural design of the five Davidic Collections provides a clear parallel to the five-book structure of the Psalter and the Pentateuch . . . Scholars generally agree that the five-book structure was intended to lend canonical legitimacy to the Psalter . . . but with the five Davidic Collections, there is a further invitation for the reader to connect and compare the dual Mosaic-Davidic figures. The figure of David is now set on a par with Moses.” (Design 262.) “Thus, the Psalter brings together two of the most important covenantal traditions of ancient Israel (Mosaic and Davidic) at a time when the experience of God’s wrath for covenantal unfaithfulness (exile) was still raw and messianic hopes wanting.” (*ibid.*, 263.)

## Appendix: The Broader context of David and the Psalms

### *1-2 Samuel*

1. 1 Sam 16:14-23 (esp. v. 18). Here David is known as a good lyre player,<sup>18</sup> and one in whom is the presence of the LORD. N.B. the role of driving away a bad spirit. No hint of him as composer, just as good player.
2. 2 Samuel 6:1-19 (esp. vv. 5, 15 [dancing, etc.] and v. 8 [did he express anger in song?]). The occasion is bringing the ark to Jerusalem. The context is a cultic ritual of ark procession.
3. 2 Sam 1:17-27. (Qina [lament] meter), lament over Saul & Jonathan. Mays notes: the case is strongest here for David as actual composer. "David is shown as creator and patron of national music. . . . The narrator knows that a song attributed to David was transmitted as part of a collection whose text was fixed in writing." (Mays, *The Lord Reigns*, p. 91).
4. 2 Sam 22. Vss. 2-20 Praise for deliverance from enemies. Vss. 21-28 pertain to his prowess as a warrior, by which he achieves dominion over nations (vv. 29-51).

Implications: 1. It is possible to have a psalmic perspective on entire career of David. Mays, "The reader is asked to think of each episode of the whole in terms of the Lord's deliverance, a vast witness to the covenant loyalty of the Lord to his covenant king . . . It is the hermeneutical door in the narrative for the use of the psalms in general as context for reading the David story" (p. 91, emphasis mine).

5. 2 Sam 23:1-7. Mays, "The idea that David's words might be the word of the Lord about the future messianic king and kingdom begins with this final poem in the narrative of Samuel." (p. 92).

David teaches the people to lament in 2 Sam. 1:18 (occasion is death of Saul).

### *1-2 Chronicles*

The focus is on David as founder of music and song, the 'audio component' of the Jerusalem cult. David does this from the beginning right through to the end of his career (1 Chron 23). The ordinances of David remain unchanged through the time of Solomon (2 Chr. 8:14), Jehoida (23:18), Hezekiah (29:25-30), and Josiah (35:15) and right through to post-exilic times (Ezra 3:10, Neh. 12:25).

Missing from Chronicles is any link to David as a lyre player. Songs of David are not included and there is no link to an occasion in David's story, apart from an incident of national history (Ps. 60 and 2 Sam. 8:3-8; 10:6-18; 1 Chron 18:3-11; 19:6-19). All occasions for lament and penitence are missing in Chronicles.

1. 1 Chron 15:16-24. Certain Levites, at David's charge, were appointed as singers and musicians to accompany the ark on attempt #2 to bring it to Jerusalem (see also 1 Chron 16:4).
2. 1 Chron 23:5; 2 Chron 7:6, 29:26.) David is credited with making musical instruments. He also designated liturgical occasions for the use of music (1 Chron 23:30).

Several texts suggest that temple prophecy and cultic praise are generically the same, viz. that the songs are understood to be prophetic in character. (E.g., 1 Chron 25:1-3, 2 Chron 29:30.) Other key texts: 2 Chron 23:18; see Ezra 3:10-11; Deut 17:18-20; 2 Sam 7:19.

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<sup>18</sup> Music functioned in four main contexts in ancient Israel: social celebration, warfare, incantation, and cultic rituals.