

On Seeing Christ in All the Psalms
A Lenten Academic and Devotional Lecture for ANiC Clergy and Bishops
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INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

A. Goal

By the end of the presentation you will have:

- a) refreshed and enhanced your understanding of the Psalms *as a meaningful whole*, that is, as a book which, like any other, makes a case; and
- b) gained fresh insight into (and a little practice with) how more broadly to see Christ in nearly every one of the psalms

B. Hermeneutical Assumption:

Unlike some evangelicals, I shall assume that the meaning of a biblical text (here the Psalter) is not limited to “the intention of the original (human) writer” but that it can also include the following:

- i. the intention of the editor who, long after the writing of most of the individual poems, placed them in a sequence with a particular purpose in mind,¹
- ii. the broader intention of the eternal (Divine) author of the biblical text (*sensus plenior*)
- iii. the way in which the Book of Psalms was understood at the time it was completed, which was close to the time of Jesus and the Apostles.

Limitation:

To allow time for devotional application, I shall skip over much of the reasoning behind the findings in order to showcase the findings themselves; I shall also mostly omit alternative suggestions and matters of debate.² (I shall nonetheless warn you of any ideas that are rare or unique to me.)

¹ Anyone can see this at the level of the most basic structure of the book, in which laments that predominate at the beginning give way to praise at the end. Our quest will focus on the developments in the concept of Davidic (and Divine) kingship in the book. Compare the editor of the various psalms to someone who builds a specific thing out of lots of different lego pieces. (Because the psalter contains earlier fixed-subcollections of psalms, scholars focus on where the editor was at liberty to add psalms, such as at the beginning or end of a subunit.)

² For more on evidence and matters of debate, as well as an elaboration of my argument here, see Glen Taylor, “Psalms 1 and 2: A Gateway into the Psalter and Messianic Images of Restoration for David’s Dynasty,” in *Interpreting the Psalms for Teaching and Preaching*. Edited by Herbert W. Bateman IV, and Brent Sandy. (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2010) pp. 47–62, 261–64.

Some misnomers: that all the psalms were written by David, that the sequencing of the psalms—i.e., which one became 1, 2, or 3, etc. up to 150—is random, like pearls on a string; that the superscriptions [psalm titles] are not a useful guide as to how individual psalms should be read³ (a shortcoming of most Anglican psalters).

Did you know? That the Book of Psalms consists of Five Books? I. 1-41, II. 42-72, III. 73-89, IV. 90-106, V. 107-50. (Recall which other part of the OT comprises five books. Now consider Psalm 1 as an introduction to the Book of Psalms—verses 1-2: “Blessed is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of the LORD and who meditates on his law day and night.” BTW—who else pronounced beatitudes in relation to a meditation on the law?)

I. Towards a Contemporary Understanding of the Psalms as a book whose message is primarily about Jesus Christ

Main point: by the time the composition of the Book of Psalms was completed, its final-form editing reflected a growing understanding that the Psalms are ultimately a collection of prophecies about the Messiah.⁴ (Compare Acts 2 where Peter considers the Psalms to be prophecy in the same way the Book of Joel was).

But how could a hymn-book have become a collection of messianic prophecy? Here are five factors.

1. The translators of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT, of which the apostles were aware) translated the common title to many of the psalms not as “for the choir-director, concerning David,” as they should have but—providentially (?)—as “pertaining to fulfilment in relation to David.”

³ True, many superscriptions are known to have been added much later than the psalm itself and thus of dubious or uncertain historical merit, but they provide important early clues as to how the psalms were understood and read.

⁴ “the royal psalms themselves came at a later stage in their history to be read as hope for the one who comes Once Isaiah had been on the scene, the psalms began to be drawn into the context of prophecy itself, and to move into another genre. Within Old Testament history itself, these psalms began to be read and understood themselves as messianic prophecy. The inauguration they described awaited a candidate; the title ‘Son of God’ hung in the air because there was no specific human historical person to whom it could be given.” James Luther Mays. The quote likely comes from his essay on the Christ of the Psalms in his book *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook of the Psalms*. (Mays’ reference here is primarily to the royal psalms, but I believe they can be applied more broadly to the individual lament psalms as well as to others bearing the title “pertaining to fulfilment in relation to David,” which is how the Septuagint translated the Hebrew lying behind our translation: “For the choir director. Concerning David.”)

2. What we call Individual laments psalms were probably written by the king of Israel or Judah. The royal connection these individual “hurting” (lament) psalms probably have—including for example Psalm 22—justify their also being considered genuinely “messianic.”
3. The Dead Sea Scrolls yielded a variant form of the book of Psalms. This variation, called 11QPs^a, contains an appendix that explicitly claims that the psalms are Davidic prophecies.
4. Most importantly, the editing of book of Psalms as a whole, implies to me and many others that the book as a whole is messianic, and the brand of messianism I believe is virtually identical to Jesus’ self-understanding as the Messiah prophesied in the Psalms. Note quickly the four key tenets below before I show us a diagram outlining the structure of the book.

Key Tenets of the Structure of the Book of Psalms

- i. Psalms 1-2 together constitute *The Introduction* to the Book of Psalms and thus set the tone for how the book *as a whole* is to be read
- ii. [Psalms 146–150 conclude the Psalter with a PTL theme]
- iii. Books I-III [Pss 1–89] of the Psalms place relatively more emphasis on the kingship of David whereas Books IV–V [90-150], compiled after the exile, emphasize the kingship of Yahweh
- iv. As if to intimate the historical end of human Davidic kingship as a national and political phenomenon, Book III ends with Psalm 89 in which Davidic kingship seems to end in ruination. This signals a crisis that Books IV-V seek to address.

[Let’s take time out to look at the diagram of the structure of the Book of Psalms.]

So, assuming we are right that the Psalter is a book that “prophesies” a coming Messiah, what sort of Messiah-king fulfills the book’s prophetic expectations? Here are suggested criteria:

1. Like Psalm 1 and its companion Deut. 17:15-18, he will be a king who is a pious student of the law. He might be expected to give further commendations of law keeping, such as with a speech starting, as here, “blessed is the one who” and who, as also in the Sermon on the Mount, talks of two ways (cf. Mt 7:7-28).
2. Like Psalm 2, he will be a king of the Jews declared by God to be his adopted Son. He will be conspired against by foreigner; yet his reign will be affirmed by God as cosmic in scope.
3. Like Psalm 3, 22, etc. the David figure must suffer at the hands of others; and, as in Psalm 22: 31bff make an inexplicable and surprising victorious come-back.
4. Like the Davidic figure of Psalm 89 he gets pummeled, perhaps even to the point of death.

5. Three psalms after 89, there is a surprising announcement that the King has become Yahweh himself. This announcement is striking for its bold and novel proclamation because Yahweh has always been king. Something is nonetheless new. A possible answer lies in that king David is resurrected in the sense that he appears even after he has died, namely in Psalm 110 where David testifies to the existence of a mysterious figure whom he calls “lord” who sits at God’s right hand.

II. Reading the Psalms broadly as pertaining to Jesus Christ: Where and how

Main point:

Recent biblical scholarship, along with the discovery of the DSS, provides justification for reading the psalms broadly as referring prophetically to the Messiah (as Jesus of Nazareth).

Advice:

General:

Where the psalms at any point remind you of Jesus—where segments sound like his words, make you think of him, his ministry or destiny, feel free to interpret them in light of Him. The interpretive posture of typology allows us to zero in where the analogy with Christ fits and to phase out where it does not (e.g., in Psalm 41: 4 where it says “[for I have sinned against thee];” and Psalm 41:9, “He [who is my close friend, in whom I trusted] who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me”; compare John 13:18 which omits the latter segment I have placed in brackets.

Further on typology as a hermeneutic device:

J. J. S. Perowne, a 19th century Anglican, very helpfully advocates a “typologically-prophetic” mode of interpretation, explained as follows:

“Hence we can freely and safely adopt this principle of interpretation in all cases. We can see in every Psalm which may reasonably be regarded as Messianic, a primary reference to the writer and to his own circumstances; and, so far as confessions of sin meet us, an exclusive reference; whereas in all else, *without maintaining a conscious prophecy, we can recognise the language of a type waiting its proper accomplishment in the Antitype.*” (*Commentary on Psalms*, 1878, reprint ed. [1966], p. 55.)⁵

⁵Perowne (commentary on Psalms, pp. 53-54) writes further with respect to Psalms 2, 20, 21, 45, 72, 110 “In all . . . a King is celebrated. “In all, some Jewish monarch, either on his accession, or at some critical period of his reign, is the immediate object before the eyes of the inspired Poet. But in all the monarch grows larger and larger and fairer than the sons of men. He is seen ever in the light of the promise made to David, and in that light he is transfigured. Human he is, no doubt: many words spoken of him pertain only to a human king; but many also are higher; many cannot, except by force of exaggeration, be made to apply to one who wears the frailty together with the form of man. There is but one interpretation by which the apparently discordant elements in these Psalms can be held

Specific:

Try seeing Jesus in one or more of the following ways:

- as the speaker of the (especially Davidic) psalm
- as the one spoken about [including wrt his second coming & final judgment]
- as God referred to more generally
- as the solution to the problem
- as the goal (telos)
- as our empathic advocate where the psalms pertain to us as God's people

Examples:

Easy cases include Psalms 2, 22 and 72 which could be titled, "*A communal, exuberant, expression of confidence in the glorious future reign of Jesus Christ and the future of His Kingdom.*" Try 72:8-11.

Psalm 41 (NASB)

Psa. 41:0 For the choir director. A Psalm of David.

Psa. 41:1 How blessed is he who considers the helpless;
The LORD will deliver him in a day of trouble.
² The LORD will protect him, and keep him alive,
And he shall be called blessed upon the earth;

For the above, one thinks of Jesus giving beatitudes with a similar subject matter. [I'm taking Jesus as the speaker here.]

For the same, one should think of ourselves [and others] as the recipients of Jesus' glad tidings pronounced here—and as his agents.

And do not give him over to the desire of his enemies.
³ The LORD will sustain him upon his sickbed;
In his illness, Thou dost restore him to health.

Psa. 41:4 As for me, I said, "O LORD, be gracious to me;
Heal my soul, [for I have sinned against Thee.]"
⁵ My enemies speak evil against me,

together. It is that according to which the Psalms are regarded, not simply as predictive, but as properly typical [i.e., typological] in their character."

“When will he die, and his name perish?”
6 And when he comes to see *me*, he speaks falsehood;
His heart gathers wickedness to itself;
When he goes outside, he tells it.
7 All who hate me whisper together against me;
Against me they devise my hurt, *saying*,
8 “A wicked thing is poured out upon him,
That when he lies down, he will not rise up again.”
9 Even my close friend, [in whom I trusted,]
Who ate my bread,
Has lifted up his heel against me.

For the above, one can read this as the words of Jesus to the Father. (In verse 4 I omit that part which does not contribute to the typological comparison. [I’m taking Jesus as the speaker here too.]

Psa. 41:10 But Thou, O LORD, be gracious to me, and raise me up,
That I may repay them.
11 By this I know that Thou art pleased with me,
Because my enemy does not shout in triumph over me.
12 As for me, Thou dost uphold me in my integrity,
And Thou dost set me in Thy presence forever.

For the above one can read this as a prayer of Jesus to the Father, in which He expresses confidence in his resurrection. [What of “That I may repay them”? Options: omit, push forward to the final judgment, see this as Jesus’ prerogative not exercised.] [Again I take the speaker as Jesus.]

Psa. 41:13 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
From everlasting to everlasting.
Amen, and Amen.

For the above, one can take this as one’s own response to God in Christ, or as Christ’s own blessing of the Father.