



Translation, Interpretation and Exposition of Psalm 144 in Its Canonical (Messianic) Context

“The important theological message, based on . . . [Psalms 138-45], is that distress and supplication will continue to characterize the Davidic community until the ideal social-reality arrives (Pss 144-45).”

(Peter Ho, *Design of the Psalter*, 264.)

“In Psalm 18 the threat has been resolved, thus prompting thanksgiving; in Psalm 144 the threat lingers, thus prompting petition.” (Tucker and Grant, *Psalms NIVAC*, 973.)

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THE TEXT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Psalm 144

Concerning Davidⁱ

Blessing Yahweh for His strength, care, and provision

¹Blessed isⁱⁱ Yahweh my rock,
who instructsⁱⁱⁱ my hands for war,*
my fingers for battle.

²My loyal ally^{iv} and my fortress,
my stronghold and my very own deliverer,*
**My shield in whom I take refuge,
who subdues my people^v under me.**

Wonder at God’s attention to mortals^{vi}

³O Yahweh, what is man that you take note of him?*
A son of a human^{vii} that you show regard for him?^{viii}
⁴A man is like a breath,*
his days are like a passing shadow.^{ix}

Call for the heavenly warrior—who here is also the creator-- to intervene against ominous and deceitful foreign powers^x

⁵O Yahweh, bend your sky^{xi} and descend,*
lay hold of the mountains so they will smoke.

⁶Flash lightning and disperse them,*
Issue your arrows and rout them.

⁷Issue your hands^{xii} from on high,*
**rescue me and deliver me from the great waters,^{xiii}
from the hand of foreigners.**

⁸Whose mouths speak a lie,*
and whose right hand is a right hand^{xiv} of falsehood.

Offer of praise in anticipation of deliverance

⁹ O God, I will sing a new song to You.*

With a harp of ten (strings)^{xv} I will make music for You^{xvi}

¹⁰ Who gives victory^{xvii} to kings,^{xviii}

Who rescues David,*

His servant from the sword of wickedness.

¹¹ *Rescue me and deliver me from the hand of foreigners,**

Whose mouth speaks deceit,

and whose right hand is a right hand of deception.

Anticipating a secure, blissful, future^{xix}

¹² Whereupon^{xx}

may our sons in their youth be like saplings fully grown,*

Our daughters be like corner pillars carved after the pattern of a palace.

¹³ May our storehouses be full,*

providing produce upon produce!

May our flocks increase by thousands,*

Even myriads in our outlying areas!

¹⁴ **May our cattle be heavy.**^{xxi}

May there be no breach, sortie*

and no wailing^{xxii} in the streets.^{xxiii}

Concluding beatitude couplet

¹⁵ Happy are the people^{xxiv} for whom such (is the case),*

Happy are the people whose God is Yahweh.^{xxv}

...

(Then follows Psalm 145, "A Praise Song, Concerning David"^{xxvi})

ⁱ Despite the strong affinities between this psalm and Psalm 18 (also found in 2 Sam 22) the superscription which heads those psalms is lacking here, where it says only "pertaining to David." The reason for this is not because historically referential superscriptions don't occur in Book V (compare Ps 142 in this collection); rather it is for two reasons. First, here in this post-exilic part of the Psalms there is a new enemy. And second, whereas Ps 18/2 Sam 22 are in praise for God's having delivered David, in Psalm 144 the new David pleads with God to deliver again. (The ancient and highly influential Greek translation(s) adds "and referring to Goliath." The veracity of the historical reference is open to serious question, but it is easy to see why the editor thought this psalm fit the context of David fighting his fiercest foreign enemy: Goliath!)

ⁱⁱ Or "blessed be." Blessed 'be' moves more in the direction of people blessing God rather than the other way around. And although God blesses his people, his people are at times, as here implicitly, invited to "bless" God. ("Depending on the context, usage, and form, 'to bless' can mean 'to praise,' 'to bless,' or even 'to greet.' [Tucker and Grant, 975.]) Of course, if the psalm's referent (the Davidic Messiah) was divine, His blessing God would be more apt!

ⁱⁱⁱ As with many psalms, a word at the end of a previous psalm --- here "instruct/teach" in Psalm 143:10--- occurs at the beginning of the next psalm. German scholars call this a *stichwort*. Whether intended or not, the links aid the memory. The theological point is that David recognizes that the Lord's teaching, which in Psalm 143 pertained to learning to do God's will, includes the art of warfare (cf. Rev. 19:11-16). (As here,

God's anointed ruler in Ps 2, was expected to wage war against kings who were enemies of God and the ancient covenant nation of Israel.) Interestingly, in Psalm 145 David will (implicitly) *teach* us to praise God!

^{iv} The word is *hesed*, the well-known term for God's covenant loyalty, often translated "lovingkindness."

^v Some manuscripts and early translations have "peoples" which obviates the problem of David "subduing" (a harsh word in Hebrew) his own peoples. In support of "peoples" compare Ps 18:47. Generally, the reading most likely to spawn correction is to be preferred (here "my people"). It is helpful that David attributes the subjugation to God. Interestingly, Belcher (*Messiah*, 176 fn. 183) adds, "The Hebrew makes sense in light of the ministry of Christ because most of his deceitful enemies were among God's covenant people, many of whom had to be subdued, but not in a military sense." (Hossfeld and Zenger favor the "my people" reading, suggesting that reference is perhaps being made to some sort of internal unrest among the Jewish people of the time (?) [Tucker & Grant, 976.]

^{vi} Verses 3-4 contrast what the psalmist imagines God's estimation of humanity to be with the care and attention He has given David in vss. 1-2.

^{vii} In the equivalent expression in Psalm 8, the term is "son of man," which aptly spawns a Christological reading in Hebrews.

^{viii} Compare Psalm 8:3. What leads the psalmist there to ponder God's concern for humanity is his looking at the heavens. There the psalmist notes a dignity and bestowal of favor on the "son of man"; here the emphasis is on his weakness and transitory nature.

^{ix} The portrait of the fleeting frailty of humanity provides the backdrop for the psalmist's request; the logic is that weak people need help from a strong God, and so help from that God is asked.

^x Psalm 18:6-18 (especially 9-14) are a must read here; they are like an expanded version of these verses. However, whereas in Psalm 18 this poetic imagery was used in the context of an expression of trust, here in Psalm 144—owing to the Davidic figure's sorry plight as he faces a deceitful foe—the imagery is used to plead with God to intervene. (So, for example, whereas in Ps 18:9 David recalls how the LORD 'parted the heavens and came down,' in 144:5 David says, "part your heavens, LORD, and come down.")

^{xi} In ancient cosmological understanding the sky (often translated firmament, as typically in Genesis) was understood to be solid matter, thus the need for Yahweh, here poetically described, to bend it. (This is a case of divine accommodation to an ancient understanding of the cosmos that was prevalent at the time.)

^{xii} Tucker & Grant (977) correctly observe that "hands" (plural) refers to God's role as creator (cf. Ps 8:6; 143:5), whereas "hand" (singular) refers to 'God's capacity to help his people' (slightly adapted). Even more "hands" refers to "God's creative power to bring order out of chaos." Thus, in making this slight change (i.e., from singular to plural), the psalmist sought to 'represent the theophanic Yahweh [i.e., the one who makes a powerful appearance] also as the creator God' (*ibid.*, 978, citing Hossfeld & Zenger in the last instance).

^{xiii} Mentioned here but not again in v 11, the "great waters" refer in v. 7 to foreigners (especially their deception). (Compare Ps 18: 16-17: "He reached down from on high, He took me, He drew me out of the mighty waters [same expression as here]; He saved me from my fierce enemy, from foes too strong for me.") In referring to these rulers as "waters"—a term which in poetic texts often refers to ominous and foreboding chaos—the psalmist implies these rulers as evil; their deceit is implied to have widespread negative connotations on a spiritual and cosmic level. See further Tucker & Grant, 978. (The deception and plotting of the religious leaders against Jesus comes to mind as an apt example of the sort of ominous and dastardly deception that the psalmist has in mind here.)

^{xiv} "Right hand" is likely a reference to taking an oath.

^{xv} Normally this was a small harp that a player could easily carry.

^{xvi} Compare Psalm 33:2-3. Tucker & Grant (981): "The second beatitude provides the 'crucial lesson' for those who hear and read this psalm. The covenantal faithfulness of God to his people will lead him to put down their enemies (vv. 5-11) and restore their land to prosperity and peace (vv. 12-14).

^{xvii} The word here is the common one for "salvation"; "victory" is an apt and plausible rendition in a context of war.

^{xviii} As hard as it is to imagine in view of the context, some commentators argue that “kings” refers to the kings of the world (and thus “foreign” kings). It is far more likely that “kings” refers to Israel’s national kings. (I see no reason why this could not also include future sons of David.)

^{xix} “The items mentioned in vv. 12-14—sons, daughters, rain, sheep, cattle—were important assets in ancient Near Eastern families. This list is strikingly similar to Deut. 28:4, part of the blessings for obedience promised to the children of Israel as they prepared to enter the promised land.” (DeClaissé-Walford, *Psalms*, 988.) The present reality of the post-exilic period is that such blessings were often lacking, due to imperial oppression as well as natural disasters (Tucker & Grant, 980.)

^{xx} In Hebrew the word is the relative pronoun “which,” which is very hard to render in the context.

^{xxi} Many plausibly understand “heavy” as “pregnant”; thus ESV: “heavy with young.” Other translations: NIV: “draw heavy loads”; JPSV: “are well cared for.”

^{xxii} “The word *tsewahah*, ‘cry of distress’ occurs elsewhere only in Isaiah 24:11 and Jeremiah 14:2, 46:12. In all three instances the meaning is connected to community destruction and situations of depravity at the hands of others.” (Tucker & Grant, 980.)

^{xxiii} This verse is taken by some to continue describing the situation involving livestock (e.g., NASB “Let our cattle bear without mishap and without loss” and similarly ESV. Others (NIV, JPSV) take it, as do I, to begin a new thought about civil security and peace.

^{xxiv} The word “happy,” though occurring many times in Book V (eleven out of twenty-six times in the Psalter), seems here especially to echo that which frames Psalms 1-2. As Ho very aptly notes, “The ‘blessed one’ that begins the Psalter (‘happy is the man’, 1:1, 2:12) now finds fulfillment as ‘the blessed people’ at the end of Ps[alm] 144:15 (‘happy is the people’). The people of God, as a collective, is to wait in supplication and hope until the time when they would be led into the paradisaical city through the Davidic king.” (*Design*, 253). (This is what people expected at the time of Jesus; for the sake of grace and salvation the time remains in the future (Rev. 19:11-22).

^{xxv} Compare Psalm 33:12.

^{xxvi} The title is important for understanding the structure of the conclusion to the Book of Psalms. David, here regarded in terms of an ideal future Messiah and the subject matter of the previous eight psalms (138-45), sings a psalm of “praise” which is the theme of the five climactic psalms to follow. Moreover, this David’s kingship is inextricably linked with that of Yahweh, with whose kingship David is solely occupied in Psalm 145. In short, the title not only links what precedes with what follows, but it shows us that just as the old David was the champion of praise in the former temple, the new David is the champion of praise among the newly reconstituted people of God.