

to seek
to do
and to teach

Essays in honor of Larry D. Pettegrew



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To Seek...to Do...and to Teach: Essays in Honor of Larry D. Pettegrew

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Introduction

TIM M. SIGLER

IN THE GREAT ACADEMIC tradition of collegial congratulations, this work seeks to honor the life and ministry of a humble and faithful servant of the Lord—Dr. Larry Dean Pettegrew. A Festschrift is a celebratory volume that welcomes scholarly contributions from an honoree’s colleagues at various institutions where they have taught, former pupils, and friends in the guild. Throughout his illustrious career of over 50 years in theological higher education, our esteemed brother has taught at Pillsbury Baptist Bible College (Owatonna, MN), Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary (Allen Park, MI), Central Baptist Theological Seminary (Minneapolis, MN), The Master’s Seminary (Los Angeles, CA), and most recently at Shepherds Theological Seminary (Cary, NC). His investment in countless lives of his own students is multiplied by the fact that so many have gone out from his classrooms to teach others also. He has modeled the multigenerational ministry mindset found in Paul’s instruction to Timothy:

*You then, my child, be strengthened
by the grace that is in Christ Jesus,
and what you have heard from me
in the presence of many witnesses
entrust to faithful men,
who will be able to teach others also.*

2 Timothy 2:1–2 (ESV)

It is our desire to give honor where honor is due. Larry has invested in so many of us, and his contributions continue to bring each of us great blessing. Though I personally was not one of his students in the classroom,

Larry began to recruit me to follow him as Provost and Dean at Shepherds Theological Seminary beginning in 2017. The more we got to know each other, the greater my respect for him grew. He had built such an impressive team of faculty members at Shepherds, and their esteem for him was evident. As he passed along the baton, he exemplified every virtue of godly leadership and theological fidelity. He made it a joy to step into his office and be entrusted with his duties—and he continues to be a wise counselor and trusted friend. Dr. Pettegrew has taught all of us at Shepherds to reflect upon and repeat the truth that “This is the Lord’s seminary.” And he really means it! We love giving the Lord the glory for all He is accomplishing, and we are so grateful to see Him using his servants to accomplish His work for His glory. Even as we honor our friend, we are mindful to give the glory to God.

Larry’s contributions in the classroom and through his academic writings have often focused on issues related to historical theology, systematic theology, and dispensational hermeneutics. The essays in this volume seek to contribute to these areas of great concern to him and to us. Like Ezra, Larry provides a worthy example for others to follow.

*For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord,
and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.*

Ezra 7:10 (KJV)

So many conflicts over Scripture could be resolved if we all just agreed on hermeneutics. Dr. Pettegrew's impact on my biblical thinking was greatest in his Dispensationalism class at The Master's Seminary, and there I learned that everything turns on the rules of interpretation. I remain immensely grateful for his careful instruction, his excellent scholarship, and his quiet devotion to the Lord Jesus. My passion for precise hermeneutics has grown from Dr. Pettegrew's influence in my seminary days to my present pursuit of understanding how and where the Psalms prophesy the Messiah and His coming kingdom.

CHAPTER 3

A Case for a Messianic Reading of Psalm 18

TODD BOLEN

TWO APPROACHES TO THE Psalms are popular among evangelical scholars today. The first is to deny any significant messianic element, relating nearly everything to the psalmist's own life and experience. Fulfillment quotations in the New Testament are understood as "re-interpretations" or "applications," which is essentially code for saying the NT authors ignored the authors' original intent and created a new meaning in the text. The second approach is to see Christ in every psalm, identifying anything about the Lord's deity, kingship, and redemptive work as related to the person and work of Christ.¹ Appeal is made to the post-Resurrection encounters in Luke 24 when Jesus explained to His disciples "the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures," that "all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:27, 44).² Most scholarly discussion takes one side or the other, and it is difficult to find a way forward with such diametrically opposed positions.

There is a middle way, of sorts. There are those who both respect authorial intention and also believe that the apostles were honest interpreters who drew their meaning from the text rather than forced their meaning into the text. The problem, as I see it, is that most of these interpreters do not quite know how to reconcile the original OT context and the NT interpretation. They believe both, but they cannot defend or explain it, resorting to vague

1 As Belcher writes, "All the psalms relate in one way or another to the person and/or work of Christ," and "Whenever the Psalms speak of God, or use the covenant name Yahweh, they also speak of the person of Christ" (Richard P. Belcher Jr., *The Messiah and the Psalms: Preaching Christ from All the Psalms* [Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2006], 34, 40).

2 Scripture quotations are from the LSB.

language like “suggestive” and “hints.”³ A few psalms, such as Psalms 2 and 110, are clearly cited in the NT as written about Jesus, but is there a legitimate way to go beyond the commonly cited five to ten “messianic psalms” and see a more extensive prophetic agenda in the Psalms?

The purpose of this essay is to use Psalm 18 as a model for how one might legitimately read a psalm widely regarded as “non-messianic” to be prophetic of the Lord Jesus *as originally written*. The guidelines proposed here will carry over to some other psalms, leading to a more messianic reading of the Psalter than the church enjoys today. But to be convincing, the meaning must derive from David and not be superimposed by either apostolic or modern interpreters.⁴ My goal then is to show that Psalm 18 does not merely “hint” at Jesus and is not “suggestive” of someone greater than David, but that David wrote Psalm 18 for the Messiah and about the Messiah. Psalm 18 was never about David’s own experiences, but it is an eschatological messianic psalm about the seed of David promised by the Lord to reign forever on David’s throne.

The Conservative Consensus

A survey of major conservative commentaries shows that Psalm 18 is interpreted as descriptive of David’s own experiences.⁵ Allen Ross writes, “The

3 A few examples of this approach may be cited, with emphasis added: Allen Ross writes, “The passage finds fulfillment in subsequent monarchies and *ultimately* belongs to Jesus the Messiah” (*A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 1 (1–41)* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011], 461). James Hamilton writes, “The history of what God did for David in Ps 18 *also* looks forward to what God will do for the seed promised to David” (*Psalms*, vol. 1, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021], 248). J. M. Boice writes, “But although David did not intend these allusions, the correspondence between his experiences and Christ’s are *nevertheless suggestive*” (*Psalms 1–41: An Expository Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 158). What is usually not made clear is *how* a passage “ultimately” or “also” pertains to a second referent or *how* a text should be read as of Christ when it was not so intended. Appeals to typology are unsatisfying when there is no textual evidence that the author intended such.

4 This very principle is central to dispensational hermeneutics, where the clear meaning of the OT is not overridden by alleged changes in the NT. At the heart of dispensationalism is a hermeneutic that affirms the original intention of all Scripture, as it unfolds through progressive revelation, providing greater detail but never negating what came before. If it did not mean it then, it does not mean it now.

5 This essay assumes that the superscriptions are authentic and that David wrote Psalm 18. For a recent defense of this view, see Hamilton, *Psalms*, 41–50. An early date

language and images fit the experiences of David. . . . Everything about it fits his life better than any other.”⁶ Peter Craigie concludes that “the psalm’s historical situation is to be located in the life of King David.”⁷ Dale Ralph Davis observes that in “taking the heading of the psalm seriously,” this psalm must be about David’s trials.⁸ John Goldingay insists that the psalm is neither eschatological, messianic, nor Christological, but “it is an expression of gratitude for something God has done for a military leader of Israel . . . specifically David.”⁹ According to Gerald Wilson, “This psalm expresses David’s response to divine deliverance from his enemies.”¹⁰

The details of the psalm are said to conform to David’s life. J. Alec Motyer acknowledges that while David was never saved by such a glorious theophany as described in verses 7–19, he used vivid imagery to show that “behind all his circumstances lies the supernatural working of God.”¹¹ Geoffrey Grogan claims that the headship of nations celebrated in verse 43 is “shown historically in 2 Samuel 8.”¹² Of the declarations of righteousness and blamelessness in verses 20–24, Rolf Jacobson avers that David was speaking of himself, albeit hyperbolically, for “no human being can ever measure up perfectly to the law—especially those human beings who are entrusted with monarchical power!”¹³ In light of the many allusions in the

for Psalm 18 has been widely accepted since F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, “A Royal Song of Thanksgiving: 2 Sam 22 = Psalm 18,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72, no. 1 (1953): 15–34. In fact, the Davidic authorship of other psalms attributed to David is sometimes denied because they do not conform to Psalm 18 (Geoffrey Grogan, *Psalms, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 64–65).

6 Ross, *Psalms*, 438.

7 Peter C. Craigie and Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, Rev. ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 177.

8 Dale Ralph Davis, *Slogging along in the Paths of Righteousness: Psalms 13–24* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2014), 91.

9 John Goldingay, *Psalms 1–41*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 279.

10 Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms, Volume 1*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 348.

11 J. A. Motyer, “Psalms,” in *New Bible Commentary*, 21st Century ed., ed. D. A. Carson et al. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1994), 496.

12 Grogan, *Psalms*, 67.

13 Nancy L. DeClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 199.

psalm, James Hamilton believes that “David has interpreted his deliverance from his enemies as his own personal exodus from Egypt, crossing of the Red Sea, and covenant-making at Sinai. . . . David seems to present himself as a kind of new Moses.”¹⁴ While some of these writers believe that there may be something more to the psalm, Psalm 18 is first and foremost about David’s crisis, deliverance, and exaltation.

David’s Hope

This essay will challenge the consensus view by taking a closer look at David’s hope, the context of Psalm 18, and the text of Psalm 18. The first concerns the default assumption that David always wrote about his own experiences. On the one hand, I agree with the conservative view that the superscriptions are accurate and that David wrote all of the psalms ascribed to him. On the other hand, it surely is too confining to expect that David was so singularly focused on his own life, particularly after the Lord made the glorious promise of a coming seed to reign on his throne forever (2 Sam 7). The Davidic covenant was established soon after David began his rule in Jerusalem, giving the king up to 30 years to reflect on the significance of God’s revelation.¹⁵ It should not be surprising to find that David wrote psalms about his coming son; in fact, to assume that David did not celebrate this promise is to assume that his faith was weak or his memory short. But the record of 2 Samuel suggests otherwise, for David’s response to the covenant promise is given immediately after he receives it and again at the end of his life (2 Sam 7:15–29; 23:1–7). We should expect that between those two points, David’s reflections often returned to the most glorious day of his life.

These reflections surely found their way into the songs David wrote. If David knew that God would fulfill His promise to reverse the curse, defeat the wicked, and restore Eden, he would not only want to celebrate personally but he would want his people to savor the anticipation of God’s coming deliverance as well.¹⁶ While many recognize that David was a future-looking

¹⁴ Hamilton, *Psalms*, 242–43.

¹⁵ Though scholars in recent decades have inverted the chronology of David’s life to place the covenant shortly before his death, I have argued that the biblical text requires that it occurred early in his reign. See Todd Bolen, “The Date of the Davidic Covenant,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 65, no. 1 (2022): 61–78.

¹⁶ It should be assumed that David would have obeyed the commands of Deuter-

king in his conquests of the nations and his preparations for the temple, it is not so often appreciated that David's psalms were future-oriented. By their very nature, songs that were written and circulated to be used by the congregation have a future intention. Some call the people to worship and others to confession, but all have a future aspect, whether they are serving those coming to the temple next week or in the generations to come.

It is also reasonable to expect that David would desire to prepare his people for the coming king as well as to prepare the coming king for his reign, just as the Proverbs of Solomon were intended to do.¹⁷ The point is not that every psalm was written to or about the messianic king, but the reader should certainly expect that some of them were. Being open to this possibility allows the reader to maintain a literal hermeneutic, without feeling the need to press various details into conformity with David's life, even when they manifestly do not fit. As will be seen below, significant sections of Psalm 18 do not correspond to David's own experience, but they line up quite beautifully with a future, righteous king. Recognizing that David was not writing about himself provides for a much more satisfying reading of Psalm 18.

Two objections may be offered against a messianic reading of Psalm 18. The first is the superscription which says that David wrote "the words of this song in the day that Yahweh delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul." The common assumption is that this song must be a description of these recent deliverances. Indeed, some Davidic psalms with historical superscriptions are certainly about David's own experiences (e.g., Ps 3, 34, 57).¹⁸ But this is not the only possible subject of David's writing, for he could just as well have used the opportunity of his past victories to reflect on what the Lord was yet to do. Indeed, we see this very thing in the song of Moses, sung immediately after Israel passed through the Red Sea, where the lyrics celebrate not only what God has done but what God

onomy 17 to copy and read the Scriptures, and therefore he would have been familiar with the promises of Genesis 3:15, 12:1–3, 22:17–18, 49:8–12, and more. Nor should it be forgotten that David was a prophet, and he testified that the Spirit of the Lord spoke through him (2 Sam 23:2).

17 Few would dispute the pedagogic nature of Proverbs or their particular focus on training the king, but a similar possibility is less often considered for psalms that were written by a king.

18 Robert L. Cole, however, has argued recently for a messianic reading of Psalm 3 ("Psalm 3: Of Whom Does David Speak, of Himself or Another?" in *Text and Canon: Essays in Honor of John H. Sailhamer* [Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017], 137–48).

will do (Exod 15:13–18). In a later song of Moses, one in which Moses spoke to the congregation “the words of this song” (a phrase echoed in Psalm 18’s superscription), he focused not on Israel’s past but on its future, particularly its anticipated sin and judgment (Deut 32). Similarly, we should be open to the possibility that David was writing not about a past deliverance but a future one.

A second objection is the use of the first person throughout the psalm. Surely, it may be argued, if David is the author, his use of “I” and “my” must be his own words about his own experiences. This is indisputably the case in some psalms, such as Psalm 51 where David uses the first person to confess his own sin. But this is not the only possibility, for songwriters may well put words into the mouths of others, just as Moses did in penning Deuteronomy 32 and commanding the nation to sing it (Deut 31:19–22). The same thing occurs in various communal psalms throughout the Psalter (e.g., Ps 74, 79). Individual psalms likewise function the same way when they become the songs and prayers of individual Israelites. But is it possible that an individual psalm, written in the first person, could be originally intended as the words of another individual? This is exactly what we see in the second and third Servant Songs of Isaiah, where we hear the voice not of Isaiah but of the Servant (Isa 49:1–4; 50:4–9). Similarly, the words of Isaiah 61, also in the first person, were written not for the prophet himself but for the coming Servant who would “proclaim release to captives and freedom to prisoners” (Isa 61:1). If David was a prophet, we should allow that he could write psalms for the lips of another.¹⁹ If David could write songs for his nation to sing, surely he could write songs for his promised seed. Indeed, that descendant is mentioned explicitly in the final verse of Psalm 18 as the sure recipient of the Lord’s eternal covenant love.

The Context of Psalm 18

If we are open to the possibility that some of David’s psalms, even those written in the first person, were about his future son, then we can consider

¹⁹ I agree in part with Goldingay’s comment on Psalm 18: “The specific reference to David does not actually require that David be the person envisaged as praying the psalm, but it points in that direction, as does the content of the psalm” (Goldingay, *Psalms 1–41*, 253). Some psalms, such as Psalm 44, were written by others but in the voice of Israel’s king (Bruce K. Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg [Chicago: Moody, 1981], 13).

whether Psalm 18 might be messianic. The place to start in interpretation is not with the text itself but with the context. Specifically, to get to Psalm 18, one must read the previous 17 psalms. Just as it will not do to read Matthew 18 or Revelation 18 as standalone compositions, so Psalm 18 must be interpreted in context.²⁰

The Psalter begins with Psalms 1 and 2 serving as a joint introduction, with numerous lexical links indicating that the *torah*-saturated man of Psalm 1 is the anointed king of Psalm 2, just as Deuteronomy 17 had instructed.²¹ The Lord's response to His raging foes is to install His Messiah as king to subdue all the nations and establish God's righteous rule on earth. Though David wrote Psalm 2, this psalm is not about David (Acts 4:25). As such, it provides the reader with messianic spectacles with which to read the Psalter.²² The enemies continue raging in Psalms 3 and following, but the reader knows that the Lord has a plan to hear the prayers of His people and end their suffering.

Psalms 3–13 are a group in which two sets of five lament psalms (3–7, 9–13) bracket a central praise psalm (8). These lament psalms describe the wicked world filled with enemies who attack the king and his righteous people. In the center, Psalm 8 declares that God's majestic name will be worshiped when man rules over all creation for God's glory. Psalm 14 serves as a concluding psalm to this group, summing up David's argument that all men are wicked but the Lord will step forth from Zion to save His people

20 Though Psalm 18 and the others may have been written in a different order, they are only preserved for us in the inspired canon within a book ordered in a specific sequence, and it should not be assumed that this sequence is random or inconsequential. Many studies in recent decades argue for an intentional canonical arrangement of the psalms, including James Hely Hutchinson, "The Psalter as a Book," in *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church*, ed. Andrew G. Sheard (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 23–45. A similar argument can be made from the context of Psalm 18's parallel in 2 Samuel 22, for there it comes not immediately after victory with Saul or the nations but at the end of a disappointing life, indicating that it describes David's abiding hope and not his personal experience.

21 Robert L. Cole, "An Integrated Reading of Psalms 1 and 2," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26, no. 4 (2002): 75–88.

22 Cf. Jamie Grant's observation: "Both Calvin and Luther saw [Psalm 1] as providing the hermeneutical glasses for the reading and interpretation of the whole Book of Psalms" (Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms*, Academia Biblica [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004], 21).

and restore their fortunes.²³ In other words, Psalms 3–14 develop the ideas and characters introduced in Psalms 1–2, with the hostility of the enemies, the need to trust the Lord, the rule of man over the earth, and the promise that salvation will come from Zion.

Psalm 15 introduces another set of psalms by asking who is worthy to live on the Lord’s “holy mountain.” Psalm 2 already revealed that the Messiah would reign on the Lord’s “holy mountain,” and the qualifications given in Psalm 15 align with the *torah*-delighting man described in Psalm 1: a blameless man who sacrificially loves his neighbor. Surely Psalm 15 sets the bar quite high for dwelling in the Lord’s presence.²⁴ In Psalm 16, the speaker’s confidence that he will not be abandoned to the grave, along with an apparent self-reference to himself as the *hasid* (recipient of covenant loyalty) whose body does not see decay, further points the reader forward to someone coming who is greater than David.²⁵ Likewise, Psalm 17 seems more compatible with the Psalm 15 man than with David, since the one in Psalm 17 trusts in his own righteousness as grounds for ultimate vindication by the Lord, and he expects that he will surpass Moses in enjoying the Lord’s face-to-face presence. Psalms 15–17, therefore, provide an immediate context for Psalm 18 that puts the reader into a “messianic mindset.” We should certainly be open to the possibility that Psalm 18 is about the same righteous individual described in Psalms 15–17.

Furthermore, Psalm 18 belongs to a group of psalms that has long been recognized as forming a chiastic arrangement.²⁶ The reader of the Psalms should not be surprised to find large-scale parallelism (chiasms) among the psalms, given that individual psalms are characterized by parallelism. Two striking features make this chiastic group easier to identify: the similarity of

23 Paul’s quotation of Psalm 14 in his own conclusion of the sinfulness of man in Romans 3 may suggest that Paul also saw Psalm 14 as summing up David’s argument.

24 David himself did not meet this standard, as is clear from the fact that even early in his life, before Solomon was born, he was disqualified by God from building God’s house (1 Chr 22:7–10). If he was not qualified to build it, he was not qualified to dwell in it with the Lord, absent the redemption provided by a greater son.

25 Gregory V. Trull, “An Exegesis of Psalm 16:10,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 161, no. 643 (2004): 313–21.

26 Cf. William P. Brown, “‘Here Comes the Sun!’: The Metaphorical Theology of Psalms 15–24,” in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, ed. Erich Zenger, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium*, vol. 238 (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2010), 259–77; Philip Sumpter, “The Coherence of Psalms 15–24,” *Biblica* 94, no. 2 (2013): 186–209.

Psalms 15 and 24 and the uniqueness of Psalm 19. Psalms 15 and 24 stand out as the only two psalms in the Psalter that ask and answer the question of who may enter the Lord's presence. These two psalms bookend the group. Psalm 19 stands in the center, one of only three *torah* psalms in the Psalter (with 1 and 119). Closer analysis reveals that Psalms 16 and 23 form an inner ring with their strong expressions of confidence. Within that ring, Psalms 17 and 22 are lament psalms that describe extreme suffering and, one could argue, resurrection.

That leaves Psalm 18 as facing Psalms 20 and 21. At first glance, one might suspect that this pairing of one psalm with two psalms is contrived to facilitate a desired arrangement. But a closer look shows that not only is the lengthy Psalm 18 matched by the two shorter Psalms 20 and 21, but Psalms 20 and 21 are unified by the king's request in the former psalm and the Lord's response in the latter. For our purposes, the significance is that, as in any parallelism, the two parts of the parallelism help to interpret one another. Since Psalms 20 and 21 speak of the Lord saving His anointed king, giving him "his heart's desire," even "length of days forever and ever," and bestowing on him "glory," "splendor," and "majesty" in his utter destruction of the evil seed throughout the earth, one might wonder if Psalm 18 is also describing a king who is far greater than David. In Psalm 19, Israel's king celebrates God's perfect revelation, and this psalm too seems to have surpassed the character of David's life.

Together, Psalms 18–21 are a royal-*torah* group that echoes the royal-*torah* pair of Psalms 1–2 and anticipates the royal-*torah* pair of Psalms 118–119.²⁷ What this means for our present purposes is that Psalm 18 must not be read without reference to its canonical context, and when it is read contextually, one is well prepared to meet the greater son that God promised to David.²⁸

²⁷ Cf. Grant, *The King as Exemplar*.

²⁸ It may be questioned whether the canonical order derives from David, and if not, how the contextual setting is relevant to determining authorial intent of this individual psalm. First, it is entirely possible that David was responsible for the order of psalms in Books I and II (cf. Hamilton, *Psalms*, 52–53). Second, if the psalms were ordered at a later time, the editor may have arranged the psalms to bring out the author's meaning. Since we cannot recover the editorial history of the Psalter, it is preferable to assume that the inspired collection is consistent with the authors' intentions.

The Text of Psalm 18

Context may prepare us, but the real question is what the text of Psalm 18 says. The argument of this section is that if one believes that Psalm 18 is describing David's own experiences, one must be prepared to deny what the text actually says. Despite Allen Ross's claim that "the language and images fit the experiences of David," the reality is that Psalm 18 is strikingly dissonant with what we know about the historical David.²⁹ But when one reads this as the words of a future king, Psalm 18 provides a very satisfying portrait of God's deliverance and exaltation of the coming Messiah.

Following an introductory declaration of faith and call to the Lord in verses 1–3, the speaker uses metaphorical language to describe his experience of death or near-death: "The cords of death encompassed me . . . the snares of death confronted me" (vv. 4–5). While David faced dangers and rebellions, there are no recorded descriptions in 1–2 Samuel or 1 Chronicles of David being near death. Perhaps the closest was when he fought the Philistines to exhaustion, and Abishai came to his rescue and struck down his assailant Ishbi-Benob (2 Sam 21:15–17). But there is no indication that David was even wounded in this battle or any other. The biblical record of David's life is not exhaustive, and though one might expect that his most severe trial would be recorded, this is by no means certain. Therefore, this description alone is not decisive in determining whether this psalm is about David or the Messiah.

The Lord's response to the speaker's desperate cry is described at length in verses 7–19. The language is reminiscent of the theophany on Mount Sinai, though it seems to go significantly beyond that, describing God's coming with earthquake, smoke, fire, darkness, wind, thick clouds, hailstones, coals of fire, thunder, lightning flashes, and channels of water. The result is that "the foundations of the world were laid bare," and the Lord delivered the speaker from those who were too mighty for him (vv. 15–17). This is usually regarded as a hyperbolic description, but if David never experienced anything like this, then it seems more like fiction than exaggeration. Though there can be no doubt that the Lord fought for David in battle, the account with the clearest evidence of active divine intervention is David's battle in the Valley of Rephaim when he heard "the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees" because the Lord had gone out to smite the Philistine army (2 Sam 5:22–25). That is an entirely different event than what is described

²⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, 438.

in Psalm 18.³⁰ It is preferable, then, to view Psalm 18's account of theophany as something David did not himself experience, but as more similar to the Lord's reaction to the raging enemies of Psalm 2.³¹

The reason that the Lord intervened, according to the speaker, is the speaker's righteousness (vv. 20–24). The language here is in no way moderated or qualified, but the speaker emphasizes his worthiness to be delivered. He declares that he was blameless, had clean hands, and kept the ways of the Lord. He put all the Lord's judgments before him, kept himself from iniquity, and did not depart from his God.

This is a difficult issue for commentators, to judge from their efforts to explain how David could make such claims. Goldingay observes that this could well seem to be “massive irony” with this psalm's placement in 2 Samuel 22, following as it does David's “huge moral and personal failures.”³² One could argue that David wrote these words early in his life, prior to committing adultery and murder, but it is hard to read the psalm the same way after David's sin. But even if we assume, as some interpreters do, that Psalm 18 was written early in David's life, we still have trouble squaring it with David's conduct. Though opinions vary on how to understand David's lie to Ahimelech, his multiple deceptions of Achish, his wrath against Nabal, and his cutting of Saul's robe, it seems unlikely that the writer of Samuel intended to portray David as wholly righteous.

Commentators try to get around this by saying that the speaker of Psalm 18 is not claiming absolute righteousness. James Hamilton writes, “David claims here a relative righteousness that pertains to the way that he has not broken God's commandments in the way he responded to Saul or his other enemies.”³³ Gerald Wilson asserts that “while this does *not* assume absolute perfection, it does imply a serious dedication to righteousness and availing oneself of the remedies for sin and restoration of relationship set out in the Mosaic law.”³⁴ Dale Ralph Davis cautions that to read these words as claims

30 The phrase “the day of my disaster” in verse 18 is used elsewhere to speak of ultimate disaster, such as the fall of Jerusalem (Jer 18:17; Obad 13; cf. Deut 32:35; Ezek 35:5) and that faced by God's enemies in Jeremiah 46:21 (DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 198).

31 John Goldingay recognizes that the scenario of deliverance and sovereignty over the nations “corresponds to that in Ps. 2” (*Psalms 1–41*, 276).

32 *Ibid.*, 255.

33 Hamilton, *Psalms*, 243.

34 Wilson, *Psalms*, 345–46; emphasis original.

of sinlessness is to read them “through the lens of our twisted misperceptions.”³⁵ The problem, of course, is that these explanations do not take seriously the words of the text, changing its meaning because they *know*, from other texts, that David could not mean what was manifestly not true. I will certainly agree to this: if I believed that David was speaking about himself, I too would have to try to show how the text does not mean what it says. But if we are open to the possibility that David anticipated someone who would in fact be sinless, then he could and would make such a claim.

Rolf Jacobson argues that the language is hyperbolic since “no king, especially David, was ever completely *pure* or *righteous*.”³⁶ It should be appreciated that Jacobson recognizes the force of the claim of absolute righteousness. His solution is to suggest that “the hyperbolic language here must be interpreted in context. For example, shortly before 1200 B.C.E. the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah erected a victory monument in which he boasted that he had destroyed Israel.”³⁷ No one would question whether royal propaganda was permeated with hyperbole, but should David’s words be read here as royal propaganda? Is the context to be considered that of royal inscriptions of ancient Near Eastern kings or that of the Psalter and the wider biblical canon? Would a king who knew the true God dare to speak so publicly and absolutely of his own righteousness? There seems to be a better option not available to pagan kings who did not have the hope of a righteous seed.

There is another problem that is usually overlooked. Allen Ross writes, “The psalmist was not claiming to be sinless; no one could ever make that claim. To be blameless means that one is free from sin or forgiven for sin.”³⁸ It is preferable, however, to not assume one’s conclusion and to get one’s definitions from the context. The word “blameless” (תָּמִים; *tamim*) in verse 23 was previously used in Psalm 15:2 to describe the one qualified to live on God’s holy mountain. It is used again in Psalm 19:7 of the law of the Lord. And in Psalm 18:30, David writes, “As for God, His way is blameless.” It would seem that the word should be understood the same way in each of these texts, unless there is something in the context signaling otherwise.³⁹

35 Davis, *Psalms 13–24*, 95.

36 DeClaisé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 199; emphasis original.

37 *Ibid.*, 200.

38 Ross, *Psalms*, 439.

39 The word תָּמִים (*tamim*) is elsewhere used to describe Noah (Gen 6:9), but with

It is less convincing, however, if one's argument is based on redefining a word to suit a predetermined conclusion. Finally, it may be asked, how would the speaker say it differently if he intended to signify his absolute righteousness? The fact is Psalm 18 provides such a statement of absolute righteousness, and it is only considerations outside the text that are used to support reading it otherwise.

The next two sections of the psalm describe the character of the Lord and the way He enables the king to be victorious (vv. 25–29, 30–36). Nothing here limits the psalm as true only for David or for the Messiah, so we will continue on to the following section. In verses 37–42, the speaker describes his complete destruction of his enemies. David was victorious in his many battles (cf. 2 Sam 8), but the language once again goes beyond David's experience.⁴⁰ David had many enemies, even to the end of his life, and the sweeping nature of this description, if read as David's experience, seems more like royal braggadocio than a true record.⁴¹ But if David was meditating on the divine promises and thinking about Yahweh's declaration to His Messiah in Psalm 2, these verses simply flesh out the inevitable victories of that coming king.

The claim of total victory continues in verses 43–45 where the speaker declares that all foreigners obey him. Even more provocatively, the speaker claims that the Lord has made him "head of the nations" and that he rules over people he does not even know (v. 43). This is quite difficult to square with David's life, for as great as he was, his authority never reached beyond the smaller city-states between the Euphrates and the River of Egypt. David surely had a taste for what it would be like to be head of the nations, but these verses sound more like the king prophesied in Psalms 2, 72, and 110 who would claim "the ends of the earth" as his possession, enjoy "dominion from sea to sea," and crush "the head that is over the wide earth" (Ps 2:8; 72:8; 110:6).

the debatable exception of Job 12:4, an individual nowhere elsewhere makes the claim for himself that he is תָּמִים (*tamim*).

40 As Goldingay observes, "Even for David, Israel's greatest military hero, the portrait is larger than life, but that is the nature of reports of military triumph in the ancient and the modern world" (*Psalms 1–41*, 279).

41 These enemies included not only those like Absalom, Shimei, and Sheba, but the Philistines who were subdued but not destroyed, and Hadad who fled from Edom to return to lead a rebellion in Solomon's time (1 Kgs 11:14–18).

The final section of the psalm is filled with praise of the Lord who has given the king such great victories. Taken by itself, this conclusion could well fit on the lips of David, but they fit as well or better in the mouth of the Messiah. It is easy to imagine the Messiah—who speaks in Psalm 2:7 in the first person—as praising “the God who executes vengeance for me” (Ps 18:47). The Lord of Psalm 110 who waits for Yahweh to make His enemies a footstool under His feet here praises the God who “subdues people” under Him (Ps 18:47). However great David’s victories were, he knew that they were incomplete, for the Lord’s enemies yet remained on the earth and the “obedience of the nations” promised to the one to whom the scepter belonged was not David himself, but his seed (Gen 49:8–12). Though David would not enjoy the fulfillment of the promises during his reign, he could anticipate their celebration in the reign of his son. The psalm concludes with David’s affirmation that the Lord would indeed show His covenant love (*hesed*) to David and his seed through the fulfillment of His promises.

Conclusion

The common interpretation of Psalm 18 by scholars today fares best when the Davidic covenant is ignored, the psalm is isolated from its context, and hyperbole is frequently called upon to explain David’s excessive claims. Read in context with a literal hermeneutic, however, this psalm corresponds well with the prophecies and ministry of Messiah Jesus, and Psalm 18 should join the ranks of psalms acknowledged to have been wholly speaking of David’s seed when originally written. Reading this psalm as describing David’s life is quite unsatisfying, for the reader is constantly having to excuse David’s gross overstatement or unseemly pride. Recognizing that the messianic ruler is the speaker, however, makes sense of the whole. David knew, as the recipient of the covenant and a prophet in his own right, that the coming king would face supreme danger, trust Yahweh completely, be delivered because of His righteousness, and reign over all nations. This same Messiah would lead the nations in praising God for His mercy (v. 49), a reality that would be fulfilled only in the Lord Jesus, as the apostle Paul confirms in Romans 15:8–9: “For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, “THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME.””