

Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, and the Messianic Psalms

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Introduction

The goal of this paper is to track how evangelical and fundamentalist Bible commentators have understood the messianic psalms over the last 140 years. What points of contact are there between C. H. Spurgeon and John Goldingay? What shifts have taken place in the hermeneutical landscape? What trends have emerged? What has been gained in the last 140 years and what has been lost? The messianic psalms provide a perfect venue for examining the interpretations of commentators because one can easily suggest that these are purely predictive prophecies with no immediate meaning for their original author or audience while another can suggest that these are the words of Israelite psalmists speaking to their own situations with no view to the future. This paper will look at key messianic psalms (Psalms 2, 8, 16, 40, 69, 72, 89, 110, and 118) and how they have been dealt with in commentaries over the last 140 years, especially in regard to the emphasis on messianic fulfillment and the emphasis on original setting and contextual meaning.

Evangelical and Fundamentalist Psalms Commentators from 1869 to Present

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1869-1885)

C. H. Spurgeon was a British Particular Baptist preacher who pastored the New Park Street Chapel (later known as the Metropolitan Tabernacle) in London from 1854 to 1892. He is often called “the prince of preachers,” and his *The Treasury of David*, a seven-volume commentary on Psalms, is influential in evangelicalism and fundamentalism to this day. It is with his work that we commence our study.

Beginning with Psalm 2, where we find the first reference in Psalms to God's "anointed" (Hebrew *māšî'âh*; Greek *christós*), Spurgeon reveals his method for reading messianic psalms. He urges reading the psalm in two ways: literally and allegorically. When reading it literally, the meaning will be obvious and have an application to the life of David. At the same time one will find that "the diction is occasionally exaggerated to lead us to contemplate higher and more important concealed subjects."¹ Reading the psalm a second time "as it relates to the allegorical David, a higher series of events becomes obvious, and the meaning becomes more evident and exalted. The intensity of the language, which seems too bold and glaring for the king of Israel, is particularly suited for David's great Antitype, Jesus Christ."² Spurgeon goes on to say,

The two senses are distinct but in perfect harmony. They bear a wonderful resemblance in every feature and form; they so preserve the analogy that either may pass for the original. New light is continually cast on the phraseology; fresh weight and dignity are added. Gradually ascending from things below to things above, from human to Divine, they carry the important theme up and place it in the height and brightness of heaven."³

We see here that Spurgeon urges both readings but the Christocentric reading is the more important of the two. In fact, as Spurgeon goes through the verse-by-verse commentary he makes repeated reference to Christ as the anointed one in the Psalm and *does not once* speak of David as the referent.

Spurgeon's preference for the Christocentric reading is more explicit in his discussion of Psalm 22, where he says, "David and his afflictions may be here in a modified

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: An Updated Edition in Today's Language*, updated by Roy H. Clarke (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 8. *The Treasury of David* was originally written in seven volumes beginning in 1869 and ending in 1885.

² Spurgeon, 8.

³ Spurgeon, 8.

sense, but as the light of the sun conceals the star, those who see Jesus will probably neither see, nor care to see, David.”⁴ Once again in the verse-by-verse commentary there is no mention of David, but repeatedly Spurgeon speaks as if Jesus were the first to speak the words of this psalm. In Psalm 40 he says he will not comment on both applications as that “might involve itself in obscurity. Therefore, we will let the sun shine even though it conceals the stars.”⁵

Even Psalm 8, with its description of the role that God has given to man / to the son of man, could be read as referring to both man in general and Jesus in particular, but to Spurgeon, “Christ is the principal subject of this Psalm.”⁶ In his comments on this psalm he occasionally refers to man in general, but he always connects it to Christ, comparing man’s position after the Fall to Jesus’ position in dying for man’s sins and comparing man’s authority in Eden to Jesus’ authority when all things are subjected to him.⁷

Even when Spurgeon identifies a Davidic setting for a messianic psalm he focuses on the Christocentric interpretation. So Psalm 68:18 (“You have ascended on high”) refers to bringing the ark to Zion, but Spurgeon cannot help but note that “the antitype of the ark, the Lord Jesus, has ascended into the heavens with signal marks of triumph.”⁸ Speaking of Psalm 69, Spurgeon says,

We are sure that the Son of Man is here. Yet it seems to be the Holy Spirit’s intention, while He gives us personal types, to show the likeness to the Firstborn that exists in the heirs of salvation and to show the disparities between the best of the sons of men and the Son of God. There are vv. here that we dare not apply to our Lord; we shudder when we see our brethren attempting to do so (v. 5).

⁴ Spurgeon, 148.

⁵ Spurgeon, 319.

⁶ Spurgeon, 44.

⁷ Spurgeon, 48f.

⁸ Spurgeon, 570.

Especially, we note the difference between David and the Son of David in invoking evil *against* his enemies and the prayers of the other *for* his enemies.⁹

Furthermore, in Psalm 118, Spurgeon says David (Spurgeon often attributes psalms to David that have no attribution in the title) speaks about himself but also has “a prophetic view of our Lord Jesus, as frequent quotations in the New Testament prove beyond all question. Not every line and sentence, however, refers to the Messiah. To do that would require great ingenuity, and ingenious interpretations are seldom true.”¹⁰

We see from these texts that Spurgeon understands that texts have a meaning in their original context, he understands typology and how patterns evident from earlier revelation are often repeated and even intensified in later revelation, and he wants to focus on the later and greater fulfillment without being bogged down by earlier, lesser meanings. When Christ does not fulfill every element of the messianic psalms it is often an indication that God has set up an antithesis, where the original psalmist’s shortcomings are contrasted by the perfection of Christ and therefore highlight Christ as the better word. Sometimes, however, Spurgeon sees Psalms as referring only to Christ with no application to the psalmist’s immediate situation. This is the case with Psalms 16 and 110 and, to an extent, Psalm 45.¹¹

At the same time, Spurgeon repeatedly takes lessons for the church from messianic psalms. So on Psalm 16:1, which Spurgeon says speaks only of Jesus, Spurgeon

⁹ Spurgeon, 583.

¹⁰ Spurgeon, 1080.

¹¹ See Spurgeon, 90 and 1019. In the first case he says, “It has been the usual plan of commentators to apply this Psalm to David, to the saints, and to the Lord Jesus. We believe that here ‘Christ is all,’ since in vv. nine and ten, like the apostles on the mountain, we can see ‘no one but Jesus.’” In Psalm 45, Spurgeon sees the king referred to as divine and having an everlasting throne, so Spurgeon says, “This is no wedding song of earthly nuptials; it is a nuptial song for the Heavenly Bridegroom and His elect spouse.” While he acknowledges that Solomon may be present in the psalm, he says “Some see only Solomon and Pharaoh’s daughter, but they are short-sighted. Others see both Solomon and Christ, but they are cross-eyed. Well-focused spiritual eyes see only Jesus. If Solomon is present at all, it must be like those hazy shadows of passers-by who cross the face of the camera and are only dimly traceable on a photographic landscape” (369).

writes, “As the Savior prayed, let us pray. He became more than a conqueror; so will we through Him. When buffeted by storms, bravely cry to the Lord as He did, ‘In You I put my trust.’”¹² Spurgeon’s understanding of corporate solidarity is perhaps made most explicit on Psalm 41, where Spurgeon says, “Jesus Christ, betrayed by Judas Iscariot, is the great theme of this Psalm, but, we think, not exclusively. Jesus is the Antitype of David, and all His people are in their measure like Him. Thus, words suitable to the Great Representative are applicable to those who are in Him.”¹³ And when Psalm 8 speaks of Jesus becoming lower than the angels “for a little while” (Spurgeon is following the LXX/Hebrews quotation of Psalm 8), Spurgeon says, “[Christ’s] elect are raised to a dominion wider than the first Adam; this will be more clearly seen at His Second Coming.”¹⁴ So psalms that refer to Christ in such a way that the original application becomes insignificant are significant for those who are in Christ to a greater extent than they were to those who lived before Christ’s coming.

Conclusion. In Spurgeon’s mind, some of the messianic psalms are purely predictive with no reference to the psalmist’s own situations (Psalms 16 and 110), while other messianic psalms address both the psalmist’s situation and Christ’s situation, but when Christ’s situation is addressed, the psalmist’s situation is not near as important, and so Spurgeon does not “see, nor care to see,” the original psalmist’s situation. Spurgeon has a good understanding of typology and sees the antitype as fulfilling the psalms more powerfully than the initial type. He also understands corporate solidarity and sees the psalms as having importance for the reader to the extent that the reader is in Christ, the ultimate referent of the messianic psalms.

¹² Spurgeon, 91.

¹³ Spurgeon, 332.

¹⁴ Spurgeon, 49.

Talbot W. Chambers (1893)

In 1893, L. W. Munhall organized a conference in Asbury Park, New Jersey, that was designed to address issues that were brought up by higher critics of Scripture. Out of the conference arose his book, *Anti-Higher Criticism*, which contained essays by a number of conservative theologians. The theologian who tackled the issues with Psalms was Talbot Chambers, the Senior Minister of the Collegiate Dutch Church of New York. Chambers says in regard to Psalms 2; 45; 72; and 110,

These psalms and others like them represent the Messiah in his exaltation, and speak in the most glowing terms of his personal dignity and boundless empire. They cannot possibly be explained of any mere human or earthly monarch. Oriental splendor of diction will account for much of the language of poets and prophets, but it fails to give a satisfactory reason for the ascription of such excellence, power, and glory as these psalms declare to belong to God's anointed.¹⁵

In other words, these four psalms clearly go beyond addressing the situation of their day.

Similarly, Chambers says of Psalm 22, “The numerous and minute correspondences between this lyric and the gospel account of our Lord’s crucifixion cannot be accounted for in any other way than by supposing that the singer was guided by the Spirit of Christ, so that, whatever the immediate purpose of his psalm, he did set forth a likeness of the suffering messiah.”¹⁶ We see here that Chambers is not arguing that the psalms have no fulfillment in their initial setting but that the Spirit guided the psalmist to speak of something greater than his own situation. Chambers notes that some of the psalms that clearly portray Christ’s sufferings speak of sin (41:9; 69:9, 20f), so

it is natural to conclude that in the first instance such expressions of moral infirmity applied only to the original human speaker, and

¹⁵ Talbot W. Chambers, “The Book of Psalms (Two Parts)” in L. W. Munhall, ed., *Anti-Higher Criticism or Testimony to the Infallibility of the Bible* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1894), 137.

¹⁶ Chambers, 138.

that in the other specific portions he uttered what was not only true of his own experience, but also bore a typical reference to Him who was to come. They who deny or doubt the possibility of such a typical reference do not wisely consider the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews.¹⁷

After this Chambers goes on to speak of “the voice of prophecy” fulfilling its purpose of sustaining “the ancient Church” (i.e. pre-Christian believers) through trials by giving them hope of the coming “seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham.”¹⁸ Finally Chambers argues that the idea that these psalms referred “to some merely human monarch” is “a current modern fad [that flies] in the face of the clear and positive statements of our Lord and his apostles and the well-nigh unanimous opinion of the Christian Church from the beginning.” As examples, he says Psalm 110 “is said to have been fulfilled in one of the Maccabees” and Psalm 45 “is represented as an epithalamium for one of the Egyptian Ptolemies.” Chambers responds, “One wonders how any literary man with a spark of taste in his composition, and still more how any Christian man with any reverence in his soul, could for a moment consent to such a degradation of the oracles of God.”¹⁹

Conclusion. Clearly Chambers follows Spurgeon in seeing the Christocentric reading as more important. He emphasizes the Spirit’s role in guiding the words and believes that this has been done so that the psalms use language that no one but Christ has fulfilled. Chambers is appalled at those who deny a messianic expectation in the psalms.

¹⁷ Chambers, 138.

¹⁸ Chambers, 138f.

¹⁹ Chambers, 139.

Cyrus I. Scofield (1917)

Prime of place among fundamentalist literature goes to the *Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909 and subsequently revised in 1917 by C. I. Scofield,²⁰ the pastor of the First Congregational Church in Dallas, TX, from 1883-1895 and 1902-1907 and founder (with Pettingill and Chafer) of the Philadelphia School of the Bible in 1914. The *Reference Bible* successfully laid out dispensationalist theology in such a way as to become one of the greatest forces in promoting dispensationalism among fundamentalist churches and thereby setting the stage for the next few decades of the movement. In this work, Scofield classifies sixteen psalms as messianic (Psalms 2; 8; 16; 22; 23; 24; 40; 41; 45; 68; 69; 72; 89; 102; 110; and 118).

Scofield's notes on Psalm 2 are only concerned with "the inspired interpretation" of this psalm (that which is given in Acts 4). Accordingly, this psalm "gives the order of the establishment of the kingdom . . . in six parts":

- 1) rejection of the messiah at the crucifixion (vv. 1-3);
- 2) "the derision of Jehovah [v. 4] that men should suppose it possible to set aside His covenant";
- 3) the vexation (v. 5) "fulfilled, first in the destruction of Jerusalem, A.D. 70; and in the final dispersion of the Jews at that time; and to be fulfilled more completely in the tribulation which immediately precedes the return of the king";
- 4) "the establishment of the rejected King upon Zion" (v. 6);
- 5) "the subjection of the earth to the King's rule" (vv. 7-9); and 6) "the present appeal to the world powers" (vv. 10-12).

On Psalm 16, Scofield says, "The 16th Psalm is a prediction of the resurrection of the King. As a prophet David understood that, not at His first advent, but at some time subsequent to His death and resurrection Messiah would assume the Davidic throne." Psalm 22 is to Scofield "irresistible . . . proof of inspiration." He writes,

Psalm 22. is a graphic picture of death by crucifixion. The bones (of the hands, arms, shoulders, and pelvis) out of joint (Psalms

²⁰ All quotations of Scofield are taken from C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible: The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments* (London: Oxford University Press, 1917).

22:14) the profuse perspiration caused by intense suffering (v. 14); the action of the heart affected (v. 14); strength exhausted, and extreme thirst (Psalms 22:15); the hands and feet pierced (Psalms 22:16) partial nudity with hurt to modesty (Psalms 22:17), are all incidental to that mode of death. The accompanying circumstances are precisely those fulfilled in the crucifixion of Christ. Psalms 22:14-17. The desolate cry of ; Psalms 22:1; Matthew 27:46, the periods of light and darkness of ; Psalms 22:2; Matthew 27:45 the contumely of ; Psalms 22:6-8,12,13,18; Matthew 27:29-43 the casting lots of verse Psalms 22:18 (Matthew 27:35), all were literally fulfilled. When it is remembered that crucifixion was a Roman, not Jewish form of execution, the proof of inspiration is irresistible. . . . At verse 22 the Psalm breaks from crucifixion to resurrection; fulfilled in the 'Go to my brethren,' etc., of John 20:17. The risen Christ declares to His brethren the name, 'Father.'

Throughout these notes we see no interest in the psalmist's original setting. All Scofield comments on is the ultimate messianic fulfillment. Even when only one verse of a psalm is taken up in the New Testament, Scofield speaks of the entire psalm as referring to Christ. So Psalm 40 "begins with the joy of Christ in resurrection" and Psalm 41 in its entirety is "the Psalm of the betrayal of the Son of man." Scofield does not comment on Psalm 41:4, where the psalmist says, "I have sinned against you," so it is difficult to see how he understands portions of the messianic psalms that are not literally fulfilled in Christ. Because Psalm 69:21 is cited in the New Testament as a reference to the cross, Scofield argues that "Psalms 69:14-20 may well describe the exercises of His holy soul in Gethsemane."

At some points Scofield is clear that he sees that the psalms could not be fulfilled in their original context. For example, in Psalm 89:27, God says of David, "I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth." Scofield says this is proof that the Davidic covenant "looks far beyond David and Solomon," because "'higher than the kings of the earth' can only refer to Immanuel." Similarly, Psalm 110 historically begins with the ascension of Christ and prophetically looks "to the time when Christ will appear as the Rod of Jehovah's

strength, the Deliverer out of Zion [v. 3],” and “to the judgment upon the Gentile powers which precedes the setting up of the kingdom [vv. 5-6].”

The closest Scofield gets to acknowledging the psalmist’s setting in a messianic psalm is in his comments on Psalm 72, where he says, “The Psalm as a whole forms a complete vision of Messiah’s kingdom so far as the O.T. revelation extended. All David’s prayers will find their fruition in the kingdom.” This gives a key to understanding Scofield’s view of the messianic psalms. To Scofield they are direct prophecy (“a complete vision of Messiah’s kingdom”) and prayer at the same time. Nevertheless it is the prophetic element that is highlighted throughout Scofield’s notes.

Scofield concludes his comments on the messianic psalms in his notes on Psalm 118, where he lists five ways Christ is seen in the Psalms: 1) in descriptions of his suffering and subsequent glory; 2) in His identification in the Psalms as Son of God, as God himself, as Son of man, and as Son of David; 3) in his offices as prophet, priest, and king; 4) in his various works (offering himself as a sacrifice, being raised from the dead, interceding for the saints, proclaiming God’s name, fulfilling the Davidic covenant, and “restoring the dominion of man over creation and of the Father over all”); and 5) in the glimpses into Christ’s “inner thoughts” during his earthly life. Nowhere is there evidence in Scofield’s notes that Jesus is repeating the thoughts of his ancestor David; it seems that Scofield sees the messianic psalms more as the words of Jesus on the lips of the prophet David.

Conclusion. While Spurgeon and Chambers both acknowledge that the messianic psalms had an initial meaning in the human author’s mind, we do not see this acknowledged in Scofield (the closest we come is in his notes on Psalm 72). To Spurgeon and Chambers there were two ways of reading the messianic psalms, but the Christocentric reading is most important.

Scofield may have had the same view but all that he makes explicit is that he follows the Christocentric reading. Often it is clear from the wording (as Spurgeon and Chambers agree) that these psalms are not fulfilled until they find fulfillment in Christ.

William L. Pettingill (1937)

William Pettingill (1866-1950) was a close friend of Scofield who cofounded the Philadelphia School of the Bible with him. His *Christ in the Psalms*, which was published by Fundamental Truth Publishers in 1937, discusses fourteen psalms that are “unquestionably Messianic” due to their being quoted in the New Testament²¹ (Psalms 2; 8; 16; 22; 31; 34; 40; 41; 45; 68; 69; 102; 110; 118). In his analysis of each psalm he begins with the New Testament quotations of the psalm, clearly indicating that to Pettingill the best indicator of whether or not a psalm is messianic is whether or not the New Testament applies it to Jesus. Looking at Psalm 2, Pettingill discusses the fact that the Hebrew word *māšîaḥ* (“anointed, messiah”) was used to speak of “prophets, priests, and kings [who] were inducted into office by having the holy oil poured upon them,” and then he goes on to say that Jesus is “the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ, par excellence, for He is Prophet, Priest, and King.”²² As Pettingill discusses the psalm further it is difficult to see how the psalm applied to the initial psalmist. So he says of verse 7, “That the Lord Jesus is the Speaker here is shown by the New Testament references to this verse.” The “today” of the declaration of sonship is the day of Christ’s resurrection because that is the day it is linked to in Acts 13:32f.²³

Regarding Psalm 16, Pettingill says, “The speaker throughout the Psalm is Christ. Written a thousand years beforehand, the Psalm yet describes the meditations of the Holy One as

²¹ William L. Pettingill, *Christ in the Psalms* (Findlay, OH: Fundamental Truth Publishers, 1937), 10.

²² Pettingill, 14.

²³ Pettingill, 16f.

He trod the path toward the cross of Calvary.”²⁴ Throughout his analysis of this psalm, Pettingill ties in other Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures that illuminate what Jesus would have said as he “trod the path toward the cross of Calvary.” A number of times he speaks of this as an example for us that we can have the same hope in the midst of suffering. But nowhere does Pettingill discuss the possibility that there was a meaning for the original psalmist.

Psalm 22 is also seen as “a picture of our Lord’s crucifixion, written a thousand years in advance.”²⁵ To Pettingill, the problem of why God forsook Jesus in verses 1-2 is answered in verses 3-5: because he delivered those who were sinful when *they* called. Modern commentaries typically view verses 3-5 as expressing the psalmist’s hope that though he feels forsaken now, he can remember that God has always answered the prayers of his beloved and therefore he will be faithful to the psalmist in the end. Pettingill, however, sees verses 3-5 as the reason for the forsaking of verses 1-2: because Jesus took the sins of the world on himself, God forsook Jesus rather than the sinners who called on him. Pettingill then quotes at length Scofield’s list of the various literal fulfillments of this psalm that happened in the crucifixion, concluding with Scofield’s words: “When it is remembered that crucifixion was a Roman, not Jewish form of execution, the proof of inspiration is irrefutable.”²⁶ Pettingill goes on to argue,

Of course David could not have known that his Root and Offspring, the Christ of God, would be put to death by crucifixion; and even if he had known it, he could not have predicted the method of that crucifixion. Crucifixion was not always done the same way. Sometimes only the hands were pierced, leaving the feet to be tied to the cross. . . . But in this case, the real writer of the Psalm, the Holy Spirit of Truth, put it down minutely and circumstantially. So it was prophesied and so it was fulfilled!²⁷

²⁴ Pettingill, 33.

²⁵ Pettingill, 43.

²⁶ Pettingill, 45f.

²⁷ Pettingill, 46.

Pettingill says, “There were at least twenty-five just such accurate fulfillments of Scripture in those last twenty-four hours preceding the death of the Lord Jesus, including the hours of crucifixion. It is an irrefutable proof that the Scriptures are indeed the Word of God.”²⁸

We see here that to Pettingill the messianic psalms are prophecies given by the Spirit to speak directly of their future messianic fulfillment. This is clear in his analysis of Psalm 69, where he says, “The Speaker throughout is not David, but our Lord Himself.”²⁹ When wrestling with verses that do not speak of known details in Jesus’ life, Pettingill speculates as to events that must have happened in Jesus’ life since they are communicated in the psalm. So because Psalm 69:4 says, “I restored that which I took not away,” Pettingill says, “What can this mean, unless it means that our Lord was actually accused of stealing things, and instead of defending Himself He made restoration for that which He had not taken.”³⁰ Similarly Pettingill argues that Psalm 69:8 “ought to settle the long disputed question as to whether Mary had other children beside her divine Son.”³¹

Pettingill argues that Psalm 102 is a record of the dialog between the Father and Son in the Garden of Gethsemane.³² He then shows that fear is an element of the psalm and concludes that Jesus “actually feared the death which Satan sought to thrust upon Him.”³³ Because the psalm says his prayer was answered, Pettingill argues that the cup that Jesus prayed to have removed from him when in the Garden of Gethsemane must not have been the cup of

²⁸ Pettingill, 47.

²⁹ Pettingill, 105.

³⁰ Pettingill, 106.

³¹ Pettingill, 107.

³² Pettingill, 116.

³³ Pettingill, 121.

suffering and death, but specifically the cup of “dying at the hands of Satan in Gethsemane.”³⁴

This must have been Jesus’ prayer in the Garden because it fits the details of Psalm 102 and this prayer was answered.

Often Pettingill locates the words of psalms at specific points in Christ’s ministry. Because Psalm 68:18 according to the New Testament refers to Christ’s ascension, verses 1-17 of that psalm speak of the time leading up to the ascension and verses 19ff speak of what happened after the ascension.³⁵ Similarly Psalm 110 describes the dialog between the Father and the Son immediately after Jesus ascends into heaven.³⁶ Only in his discussion of Psalm 118 do we see Pettingill attempt to discover the original setting of a messianic psalm, and even there, after observing that it was likely sung at the celebration in Ezra 3, he speaks of it as describing the words that would likely have been on Jesus’ heart “as He set His face steadfastly toward the cross.”³⁷

Conclusion. While in one case Pettingill gives a messianic psalm an Old Testament setting, in the majority of cases he views the speaker of the psalm as Jesus, not David. Here he continues the trend of emphasizing the Christocentric meaning and ignoring the meaning of the psalm in its initial setting. Pettingill seems to differ from Spurgeon and Chambers in that they see an initial application that is overshadowed by the Christocentric application, whereas he sees the psalms as so entirely Christocentric that they must give details into Jesus’ life that are not given in the Gospel accounts. Pettingill is repeatedly amazed that the words of Jesus would be given 1000 years in advance.

³⁴ Pettingill, 122.

³⁵ Pettingill, 93.

³⁶ Pettingill, 127.

³⁷ Pettingill, 141.

Derek Kidner (1973-1975)

Derek Kidner was an Anglican priest who was the warden of Tyndale House in Cambridge from 1964-1978. In 1973-1975 he came out with his two-volume commentary on the Psalms in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series. According to Kidner, Psalm 2 portrays the king “in terms which leave the limitations of local kingship far behind,” for it “treat[s] the modest empire of David as though it were the world.”³⁸ While Kidner acknowledges that this could be a rhetorical device used in reference to the enthronement of a new king in Jerusalem, he sees “more than rhetoric here. The poem draws out the logic of the fact that the Davidic king reigns on behalf of God, whose throne is in the heavens (2:4). The uttermost parts of the earth are therefore his by right, and will be his in fact.”³⁹ So in discussing the exalted language of the messianic psalms, Kidner concludes that the “divine honours” given to the king (sonship in Psalm 2, co-regency with God in Psalm 110, and divinity in Psalm 45) were terms that were “not to be pressed (until the New Testament insisted that [they] should be), yet . . . not entirely inappropriate. Meanwhile the painful inadequacies of the actual kings helped to raise men’s eyes towards One to come. The Targum’s addition to Psalm 72:1 is but one instance of this, where ‘the king’ becomes ‘king Messiah’.”⁴⁰

Kidner argues that the sonship language of Psalm 2 comes from both Israel’s status as God’s son (Exod 4:22) and the declaration in 2 Sam 7:14 that the king would be God’s son. While “this pledge referred initially to Solomon, . . . it was coupled with the promise of an unending dynasty. So in each new reign it is likely that the king’s enthronement was the

³⁸ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II of the Psalms* (TOTC; London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 18.

³⁹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 18f.

⁴⁰ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 19.

occasion when he entered formally into this inheritance . . . , thereby to become the supreme expression of his people's sonship and their status as God's firstborn in the world."⁴¹

From these quotations we can see that Kidner sees an initial fulfillment of these psalms but one that always fell short of the exalted language of the psalms, thereby increasing the expectation of a greater fulfillment. The verse-by-verse analysis of each messianic psalm is in stark contrast to those of the previous commentators we have discussed. Whereas one is hard-pressed to find reference to the original setting in Spurgeon, one finds this connection far more frequently made in Kidner. Nevertheless, the connection is always made to Christ. So Psalm 118 "may have pictured to those who first sang it the rescue of Israel at the Exodus, and the eventual journey's end at Mount Zion. But it was destined to be fulfilled more perfectly, as the echoes of it on Palm Sunday and in the Passion Week make clear to every reader of the Gospels."⁴² Similarly, on Psalm 8, Kidner says, "The high calling of *man*, or, in the parallel term, *the son of man* (8:4), is contrasted in Hebrews 2:5ff. with humanity's failure to attain to it, but is shown to be fulfilled in Jesus, who is the Man *par excellence*—a truth about Him which complements His title of 'God' in Psalm 45."⁴³

According to Kidner, the language of Psalm 16 "is too strong even for David's hope of his own resurrection."⁴⁴ Similarly he says regarding Psalm 22, "No incident recorded of David can begin to account for this."⁴⁵ In Psalm 40 it is David who is going to give the sacrifice God wants and yet "he makes a declaration which in reality none but the Messiah will be able to

⁴¹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 20.

⁴² Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary on Books III-V of the Psalms* (TOTC; London: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 412f.

⁴³ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 22.

⁴⁴ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 86.

⁴⁵ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 105.

fulfil.”⁴⁶ Psalm 72, even though it is not quoted in the New Testament as messianic, is so close in its language to Isaiah 11:1-5 and 60-62

that if those passages are Messianic, so is this. Language that would otherwise be no more than courtly extravagance makes sober sense with this reference. This is not to say that it was a purely visionary composition. As a royal psalm it prayed for the reigning king, and was a strong reminder of his high calling; yet it exalted this so far beyond the humanly attainable (*e.g.* in speaking of his reign as endless) as to suggest for its fulfilment no less a person than the Messiah, not only to Christian thinking but to Jewish.⁴⁷

Kidner argues that the LXX translation of Psalm 102:23-27 (LXX 101:24-28), which assumes the same consonants but a different vocalization and versification of the Hebrew text than the MT does, speaks of the psalmist as Lord and creator. “So startling an exegesis of the psalm must have been too dazzling to contemplate, until events, in the coming of Christ accustomed the eyes of believers to the full glory of the truth.”⁴⁸

Psalm 110 is, of course, the most obvious case of a psalm that could not be fulfilled in its day. “The startling fact,” according to Kidner, is “that David spoke of a king as *my lord*.”⁴⁹ Unlike the other psalms that speak of the author’s situation in terms so lofty that they demand a greater fulfillment, Psalm 110 speaks only of the messianic fulfillment in the minds of both the human and the divine author.

Kidner concludes that the fifteen psalms that are treated as messianic in the New Testament “are regarded [by the New Testament authors] as samples of a much larger corpus. It would scarcely seem too much to infer from this treatment that wherever David or the Davidic

⁴⁶ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 158.

⁴⁷ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 254.

⁴⁸ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 21.

⁴⁹ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 393.

king appears in the Psalter (except where he is confessing failure to live up to his calling), he foreshadows in some degree the Messiah.”⁵⁰ Kidner gives Psalm 18 as an example. Verse 2 (“I will put my trust in him”) is quoted in Hebrews 2:13. According to Kidner, these words are too basic to be uniquely the words of the messiah, but the quotation of them in Hebrews “prove[s] the very point that he is one of us, ‘made like his brethren in every respect’ (Heb. 2:17; *cf.* verse 11). But this would have no force unless the writer already assumed that his readers would hear the words of David as the words also of the Messiah.”⁵¹ Therefore,

what was Davidic in the psalms was Messianic, not only where the reference was overt [Psalm 110], but where it initially spoke of David’s personal vicissitudes, as in Psalm 41:9 and 69:4. . . . As the perfect kingdom is foreshadowed by a limited and imperfect one, so the perfect Man is typified by a sinner whose sufferings, faith, sovereignty and sonship He utterly transcends.

The special quality of the Psalter’s Messianic prophecy, then is that it is lived out, as well as spoken out. There are one or two purely prophetic oracles, *e.g.* 2:7; 110:1, and much use is made of them in the New Testament; but still more is made of the prayers and praises that arose straight out of life, from situations such as Christ Himself would experience, though in a bigger context and at a deeper level as the embodiment and completion of Israel, of kingship, of man and of sacrifice, and as the incarnation of God.⁵²

Conclusion. With Kidner we see a marked shift as compared to the comments of Spurgeon, Chambers, Scofield, and Pettingill. While the other four spoke little of the initial fulfillment Kidner sees the initial fulfillment as the “liv[ing] out” of “the Psalter’s Messianic prophecy” and therefore considers the initial application worthy of comment in its own right. Nevertheless Kidner never fails to tie in the Christocentric reading that is so important to the other commentators we have examined.

⁵⁰ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 24.

⁵¹ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 24.

⁵² Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 25.

Willem A. VanGemeran (1991)

Willem A. VanGemeran is professor of Old Testament and Semitic languages at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL. In 1991 he published his Psalms commentary as part of the Expositor's Bible Commentary series. VanGemeran also speaks of the link between David and Jesus: "The Davidic representative of the Lord was the primary carrier of God's promises. Yet whatever is attributed to the Davidic king also applies to God's son, our Messiah!"⁵³ So in one example, VanGemeran states, "Psalm 72 adumbrates in the most glowing terms the kingdom of David, but neither David nor any of his sons ever achieved the idea. It is a prayer for the realization of a kingdom of righteousness and justice in which the people of God experience blessing, prosperity, and the very presence of God through his vassal-king."⁵⁴ We see echoes here of Kidner, but VanGemeran is more explicit in speaking of Christ in the Psalter. According to VanGemeran, not only do the psalms that are traditionally labeled messianic psalms or are referenced as such in the NT speak of the messiah, but the entire Psalter builds a picture of God's anointed who is intimately identified with Yahweh, who is a sufferer, who is the shepherd of God's people, and who extends the God's reign to earth.⁵⁵ Throughout the Psalter we see how the king suffers and yet "is sustained by the hope of the Resurrection, of God's fidelity, and of his fulfillment of the promises affirmed in the covenants."⁵⁶ Speaking of the royal psalmist's sufferings, VanGemeran notes that he "prays for divine deliverance, sustenance, and victory (Pss 18; 22; 89). . . . He identifies himself with the lot of man: life in

⁵³ Willem A. VanGemeran, "Psalms" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 586.

⁵⁴ VanGemeran, 587.

⁵⁵ VanGemeran, 586-590.

⁵⁶ VanGemeran, 588.

alienation awaiting the redemption of this world in fulfillment of the promises of God.”⁵⁷ So too Jesus identifies himself with the lot of man. Therefore Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the Psalms. VanGemenen writes: “The ‘royal psalms’ proclaim the coming of God. That ‘coming’ is here in the person of the Son (Pss 2; 45; 72; 96-99; 110). Jesus has gone up with acclamation (47; 68:18; cf. Eph 4:8-10), and the assurance of his exaltation lies in his having given us the gift of the Spirit.”⁵⁸

Conclusion. Like Kidner, VanGemenen repeatedly speaks of the original settings of the psalms and then notes how the psalms then become a prayer for the messiah to come and fulfill the words in their greater sense. He sees the entire Psalter as speaking to its own situation, while prophesying the messiah. Therefore both fulfillments are important.

James Luther Mays (1994)

James Luther Mays was the Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. He was the series editor for the Interpretation commentary series and also authored the Psalms commentary in that series. According to Mays, “Psalm 2 addresses the question of the community of faith faced with the problems of a history made by nations contending for power; its word to faith is the announcement of the messiah into whose power God will deliver the nations. The second psalm is a poetic speech by the messiah.”⁵⁹ It addresses the question of where ultimate power in the world resides and gives the messiah as the answer.⁶⁰ Before one concludes that Mays reads Psalm 2 much as Spurgeon would, with reference to Jesus and no other, it is important to note

⁵⁷ VanGemenen, 588.

⁵⁸ VanGemenen, 590.

⁵⁹ James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 44.

⁶⁰ Mays, 45.

that “messiah” to Mays means the anointed king, with Jesus being the ultimate messiah. Mays argues that the earthly king, as God’s anointed, rightly has an authority that “corresponds to” the sovereignty of God.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the distance between what this psalm claims to be true and the reality would have been obvious to its readers, and so Mays argues that this psalm was reread as pointing forward to the ultimate messiah of whom the prophets had spoken. Mays also believes the psalm would have been democratized and so read (in light of Isaiah 55) to speak of realities that are true for individuals and not just the anointed king. Mays believes that these two readings could have coincided with one another.⁶² Mays also believes that Psalm 8 was a democratized discussion of kingship, using kingship as a metaphor for the role that God has given to every human being.⁶³ At the same time, Mays argues that “it is by the reign of God in and through Christ that all things will be finally made subject to the sovereignty of God. Through Christ the perfect correspondence of human dominion to God is fulfilled.”⁶⁴

In discussing Psalm 16, Mays says there are three situations in which the psalm can be sung and each situation leads to a different meaning of verse 10:

It can be understood as the prayer of an Israelite who, threatened by an untimely death, takes refuge with the LORD at the sanctuary. It could be the prayer of corporate Israel after exile was over, when they had learned that the LORD would not abandon the people to death (Ezekiel 37). . . . It can be read as the general prayer of the faithful who, without any doctrine of resurrection or eternal life to explain just how, nonetheless trust the LORD to keep them with such total confidence that they cannot imagine a future apart from life in God’s presence.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Mays, 47-48.

⁶² Mays, 49.

⁶³ Mays, 68.

⁶⁴ Mays, 70.

⁶⁵ Mays, 88.

Mays goes on to say that in light of Christ's resurrection the third interpretation was taken up and extended because finally it was possible for God's people to have a confidence in the face of certain death that would match the language of this psalm.⁶⁶

Mays describes Psalm 22 as one of many prayers for help, but argues that in this psalm there is "a development of the type that raises it to its very limits and begins to transcend them." According to Mays, it is not just because Jesus' death followed this psalm so closely that this psalm is special, but a comparison of this psalm with other prayers for help will reveal "that the intensity and the comprehensiveness are a fact of the psalm's composition; it is there in the text itself."⁶⁷ Mays then argues that the psalm "create[s] a shifting montage of images evoking violence and dying that never comes into focus so that the horror could be identified and confined to some specific kind of suffering. Instead, one is given the impression of the terror of cosmic anarchy brought to bear on one figure, a vision of what happens when evil breaks through the normal restraints of humanity because the restraining, correcting salvation and providence of God are absent."

Conclusion. Mays follows Kidner and VanGemeren in speaking of the original situation of the psalmist. But like all the commentators we have discussed so far, Mays draws attention to the Christocentric reading as well. To Mays the lofty language of the text demands this sort of reading. The messianic psalms speak of both the original king in his situation, and the King of Kings who came and suffered and died for us.

John Goldingay (2006-2008)

John Goldingay is the David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. His three-volume commentary on Psalms is part of the

⁶⁶ Mays, 89.

⁶⁷ Mays, 107.

Baker Commentary on the Old Testament and is perhaps the most exhaustive evangelical commentary on the Psalms. Goldingay says that while the Old Testament

does contain messianic prophecies in the sense of promises that a descendant of David will eventually rule again in Israel (e.g., Isa. 11:1-9; Jer. 23:5-6), . . . psalms such as Ps. 2 are not such prophecies. *They talk not about a coming king but about a present king.* In applying them to Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then, the NT is using them to illumine the significance of Jesus, but using them in a way that sees *new significance* in them. It is not working with the meaning the Holy Spirit originally gave them, the meaning they had for their human authors and the people who first used them. The Psalms' picture of the king may go beyond anything that a king in Jerusalem was ever likely to realize, but this does not make them implicitly 'messianic' or incipiently 'eschatological.' These psalms express Yhwh's commitment to the actual king and Yhwh's expectations of the actual king. *Nor is there explicit indication in the Psalter that psalms originally applied to the actual king were now assumed to apply to a coming king.*⁶⁸

Goldingay goes on to suggest that some post-exilic Israelites may have applied the kingship psalms to a future king in light of other Old Testament messianic prophecies, "but other strands of the OT did not look for an individual coming king of whom these psalms would once again be true."⁶⁹ Some, then, would have read the kingship psalms in light of Isaiah 55, where God promises to give the Davidic covenant to "the people as a whole in the present instead of having their fulfillment for an individual king postponed until the future. The NT's application of Ps. 2 to the believing congregation as well as to Jesus (see Rev. 2:26-28) coheres with this."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ John Goldingay, *Psalms* (BCOTWP; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006-2008), 1:72, emphasis added.

⁶⁹ Goldingay, 1:73.

⁷⁰ Goldingay, 1:73.

Goldingay argues, “It is typical of the NT to use the Psalms in a way that takes little account of their original meaning.”⁷¹ Goldingay believes that this is the way Jesus taught the apostles to interpret the Old Testament, and he argues that this is a “premodern use of the OT [that] is characteristic of the NT, as it has been characteristic of the use of Scripture by Jews, Christians, and unbelievers through the centuries.”⁷² In the context of modernity, with its emphasis on the original contextual meaning, the New Testament use of the Old Testament “became a problem to Christians involved in scholarly study,” who needed to either explain the New Testament interpretations as “objective exegesis” or argue that the New Testament was using Jewish exegetical methods that a modern interpreter could not imitate. Goldingay sees this problem as resolved by postmodernity. Accordingly, the apostles “were not trying to do exegesis,” but “were using forms of expression they found in the Psalms to help them understand themselves and formulate their beliefs. It will be important that their formulations do fit in with the inherent meaning of scripture as a whole . . . but they do not need to fit the results of exegesis of the particular passage they quote. The Holy Spirit who inspired Scripture is inspiring the writers to see a new significance in the words that appear in Scripture.”⁷³ Because of these views, Goldingay throughout his commentary does not “make the NT the filter or lens through which we read the Psalms.” Instead, he “want[s] the Psalms to speak their own message and to let them address Christian thinking, theology, and spirituality, rather than being silenced by a certain way of reading the NT that fits modern Christian preferences.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Goldingay, 1:76.

⁷² Goldingay, 1:77.

⁷³ Goldingay, 1:78.

⁷⁴ Goldingay, 1:78.

In his commentary on Psalm 8, Goldingay says the psalm “does not look forward to a new age: it has a vision that belongs to this age. . . . It does not refer to the Messiah but places a responsibility on and makes a promise to humanity.”⁷⁵ In discussing Psalm 16, Goldingay argues that it teaches more about “the material life now” (God’s provision of land and food) than about the afterlife and that the psalm should be applied in this way to encourage faithfulness to the provider Yahweh.⁷⁶ Regarding Psalm 22, Goldingay says it speaks “to the suffering of the faithful,” and Jesus is only one of the many faithful who have taken it on their lips. He is not “the primary referent of the text. It is not a prophecy. The NT use of the psalm ‘wrenches it out of its setting.’” To suggest that “Jesus and/or the NT writers thought of the psalm as a whole as applying to Jesus . . . may imply an attempt to make premodern interpretation work on a basis that modern interpretation can accept.”⁷⁷

Conclusion. We see here that Goldingay is very different from his evangelical predecessors. Goldingay is okay with the apostolic Christocentric reading as an application of the Psalms, but to him this is not “exegesis.” To Goldingay the Psalm’s application to the original psalmist is the only meaning revealed by exegesis.

Conclusion

This analysis reveals a general trend. Evangelical and fundamentalist commentators before 1950 did not “care to see” the original application of the messianic psalms. The application to Jesus was seen as so great that one would have to be “cross-eyed” to have any care about the lesser application. From 1950 to 2000, evangelical commentators wanted to see both. To them, the life of David was messianic prophecy “lived out.” So they looked at both

⁷⁵ Goldingay, 1:161.

⁷⁶ Goldingay, 1:234.

⁷⁷ Goldingay, 1:341f.

applications. In the most recent Psalms commentary by an evangelical, however, the significance the apostles see in the messianic psalms is not “the meaning the Holy Spirit originally gave them.” Goldingay views the apostolic interpretation as legitimate from a postmodern perspective, but his interest is in the original application.

Having identified this trend, we must ask what is going on historically. Is this a positive development in Biblical interpretation? Is this evangelical scholarship growing increasingly liberal? Goldingay would likely answer this question exactly the opposite way that Spurgeon would answer it. To get some perspective it would be helpful to step outside of the context of recent evangelicalism to see how a conservative commentator of the past handled the messianic psalms. For this we will briefly turn to John Calvin.

When Calvin discusses Psalm 2, he, unlike Spurgeon and other conservatives from 1869-1950, spoke more of David than of Christ. But unlike Goldingay, Calvin saw Christ as the ultimate fulfillment. So Calvin says on Psalm 2:7,

David, indeed, could with propriety be called the son of God on account of his royal dignity, just as we know that princes, because they are elevated above others, are called both gods and the sons of God. But here God, by the singularly high title with which he honours David, exalts him not only above all mortal men, but even above the angels. This the apostle (Heb. i. 5) wisely and diligently considers, when he tells us this language was never used with respect to any of the angels. David, individually considered, was inferior to the angels, but *in so far as he represented the person of Christ*, he is with very good reason preferred far above them. By the Son of God in this place *we are therefore not to understand one son among many, but his only begotten Son, that he alone should have the pre-eminence both in heaven and on earth.*⁷⁸

Calvin goes on to speak at length of the application of this psalm to Christ. He does the same with Psalms 16; 22; 45; 110; etc. Not only is this true of Calvin, but this is

⁷⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (trans. by James Anderson; 5 vols.; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1849), 1:17, emphasis added.

common of Psalms commentaries throughout history. Rabbi David Kimchi, who vehemently argued against Christian interpretations in the early 13th century, argued that Psalm 16; 19; 22; 72; and 89 were prophecies alluding to the Messiah but that they were not fulfilled in Jesus.⁷⁹ When we consider the wide array of Psalms commentaries throughout history – Jewish and Christian, conservative and liberal – those who read the messianic psalms as originally referring *only* to the original psalmist are a clear minority, containing Goldingay, liberal scholars of the 18th through 21st centuries, and very few others.

So what has happened to evangelical commentators over the last 150 years? At the risk of generalizing, it seems that in the late 19th century there was such a focus among conservatives on Christ that the application to the original psalmist was underemphasized. With the rise of fundamentalism in the early 20th century there was such a strong desire to respond to liberals that scholars did not want to mention the original psalmist at all. Then in the last half of the 20th century evangelicals became comfortable speaking of both referents of the messianic psalms, and here the commentators seem to be closest to Calvin and the historic position of the church. Finally in the early 21st century we have at least one commentator who does not differ much from the liberals in regard to whether or not to read the messianic psalms Christocentrically.

Will Goldingay be the start of a new trend or will evangelicals continue in the line of Kidner, VanGemen, and Mays? It is difficult to say. Fundamentalists may see in this a justification of the readings of Pettingill and others. Has evangelicalism's willingness to look at the original setting alongside the Christocentric reading caused evangelical commentators to grow "cross-eyed," to use the words of Spurgeon? Recently VanGemen revised his Psalms

⁷⁹ Susan Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries: Volume One* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 87.

commentary, and a quick glance at it reveals that though a number of things have changed, his acknowledgement of Christ in the messianic psalms has not. One could respond to the fundamentalist that Goldingay is reacting to the tendency of commentaries from 1869 to 1950 to see only Christ, a position that to the liberals is nonsense. Perhaps the best approach moving forward would be to study the history of interpretation of the Psalms so that a greater host of witnesses from more diverse backgrounds will help us to see the full depth of the Psalms. In this sense, Susan Gillingham's recent work *Psalms through the Centuries* is encouraging, as is the *Ancient Christian Commentary on the Psalms*. Evangelicals and fundamentalists alike need to broaden our perspective while not losing focus of the one to whom the Scriptures refer. In this regard, Calvin is most helpful:

That David prophesied concerning Christ, is clearly manifest from this, that he knew his own kingdom to be merely a shadow. And in order to learn to apply to Christ whatever David, in times past, sang concerning himself, we must hold this principle, which we meet with everywhere in all the prophets, that he, with his posterity, was made king, not so much for his own sake as to be a type of the Redeemer. . . . [A]s David's temporal kingdom was a kind of earnest to God's ancient people of the eternal kingdom, which at length was truly established in the person of Christ, those things which David declares concerning himself are not violently, or even allegorically, applied to Christ, but were truly predicted concerning him. If we attentively consider the nature of the kingdom, we will perceive that it would be absurd to overlook the end or scope, and to rest in the mere shadow.⁸⁰

Here Calvin well follows his master, who said, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! . . . These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." May our Lord likewise open our minds to understand the Scriptures, and may we likewise boldly proclaim the truth to our generation!

⁸⁰ Calvin, 1:11.

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