


# Across the Kidron

## *Reading the Psalms with David and Jesus*

John DelHousaye

At the Bible's center, the Psalms express a unique relationship between God and a people who identify with King David (r. 970–931 BC ) and, later, Jesus Christ. The American archeologist James Pritchard collected “Hymns and Prayers” from around the Ancient Near East.<sup>1</sup> They have similar themes and language, but an important difference: David's neighbors speak to gods, but their gods never respond. In the Psalms, the king often expresses fear of abandonment, yet God is not silent. The king's words come from a broken heart on fire for God's presence.

Jesus cited the Psalms more than any other book in the Bible. After his suffering and resurrection, Jesus returned to his disciples and “opened their minds to understand” them before ascending to the Father (Luke 24:44–45). Throughout the New Testament we find this unique way of reading the Psalms: David prays for God's people, who experience life's joys and sufferings, and he is allowed by the Holy Spirit to see their common salvation in Christ, the Messiah, who

1. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 365–401.

appropriates the prayers to show their fulfillment in his suffering and glory. As we are united to Christ and led by the Spirit, the prayers of David and Jesus become our own through their faithfulness on the way to glory. The Psalms are the words of David, Jesus, and God's people.

## David

David is the most fully developed, complex personality in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> At least seventy-three of the 150 psalms are attributed to the king.<sup>3</sup> Except for Moses (Psalm 90) and some anonymous psalmists, the other contributors are part of his entourage.<sup>4</sup> We also have something like an ancient biography in three books (1 Sam. 16:1–31; 2 Sam.; 1 Kings 1:1–2:12) that is retold in a fourth (1 Chron. 11:1–29:30).<sup>5</sup> The literary critic Robert Alter (b. 1935) notes, “The story of David is probably the greatest single narrative representation in antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public institutions, family, the impulses of body and spirit, [and] the eventual sad decay of the flesh.”<sup>6</sup> The Scottish minister Andrew Bonar (1810–1892) draws out a theological implication: “It was for this end that God led David the round of all human conditions, that he might catch the spirit proper to every one, and utter it according to the truth.”<sup>7</sup>

God's people may come to the Psalms with any emotion or life situation and see a mirror of their soul.<sup>8</sup> Those returning to God often

2. So also David Wolpe, *David: The Divided Heart* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), x.

3. See Psalms 3–9; 11–32; 34–41; 51–65; 68–70; 86; 91\*; 101; 103; 104\*; 108–10; 122; 124; 131; 133; 138–45. The asterisks mark where the Old Greek translation attributed Davidic authorship.

4. The other named contributors are Solomon (Psalms 72; 127); the priests Jeduthun (Psalms 39; 62; 77), Heman (Psalm 88), Ethan (Psalm 89), Asaph (Psalms 50; 73–83); and the sons of Korah (Psalms 42; 44–49; 84–85; 87–88).

5. See the contributions in *The Fate of King David: The Past and Present of a Biblical Icon*, ed. Tod Linafelt, Timothy Beal, and Claudia V. Camp (New York: T&T Clark, 2010).

6. Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), ix.

7. Andrew Bonar, *Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1978), vii.

8. Athanasius (ca. 295–d. 373), bishop of Alexandria, wrote a letter to Marcellinus that established the Christian approach to the Psalms. The text can be read in *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 101–30. Marcellinus, a deacon, had become ill and was taking the down time for Bible study. He wanted to learn “the meaning contained in each psalm.” Athanasius shows how the Psalms mirror “the emotions of each soul” (chaps. 2, 10). They are like a garden with fruit for every season. Most of the letter pairs each psalm to a specific life experience (chaps. 14–26). John Calvin (1509–1964) similarly emphasizes the range of emotion in the Psalms. Reading is cathartic, a release from “all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated” (*Commentary on the Book of the Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), xxxvii).

struggle in their prayer because they do not understand their emotional state—“Why are you cast down, O my soul, / and why are you in turmoil within me?” (Ps. 42:5, 11; 43:5)—or they presume that one has to feel a certain way before one may talk with God.<sup>9</sup> David provides the language of the heart and models honest worship.

Several psalms have inscriptions that relate the prayers to David’s life.<sup>10</sup> They usually indicate times of crisis:

- when he fled from Absalom his son (3:1)
- concerning the words of Cush, a Benjamite (7:1)
- on the day when the Lord rescued David from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul (18:1)
- at the dedication of the temple (30:1)
- when David changed his judgment before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away (34:1)
- when Nathan the prophet went to David, after the king had gone in to Bathsheba (51:1)
- when Doeg, the Edomite, came and told Saul, “David has come to the house of Ahimelech” (52:1)
- when the Ziphites went and asked Saul, “Is not David hiding among us?” (54:1)
- when the Philistines seized David in Gath (56:1)
- when David fled from Saul, in the cave (57:1)
- when Saul sent men to watch David’s house in order to kill him (59:1)
- when David strove with Aram-naharaim and Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return struck down twelve thousand of Edom in the Valley of Salt (60:1)
- when he was in the wilderness of Judah (63:1)
- when he was in the cave (142:1)

The king was not spared the consequences of living in a fallen world. He was hounded by King Saul and betrayed by his son Absalom.

9. Pss. 42:5, 11; 43:5.

10. Pss. 3:1; 7:1; 18:1; 30:1; 34:1; 51:1; 52:1; 54:1; 56:1; 57:1; 59:1; 60:1; 63:1; 142:1. The historical relationship of these inscriptions to the psalms is debated, but the matter is irrelevant to my argument. We find inscriptions in the Old Greek and Dead Sea Scrolls, and this means that at least some of them were common before Christ.

The inscription for Psalm 51, “When Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba,” memorializes David’s own greatest season of failure. He confesses,

Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you may be justified in your words  
and blameless in your judgment. (51:4)

David sinned against God, failed to offer a godly example to the next generation, and brought great suffering to his community. The Bible presents sin, a willful defiance of God’s will, as the fundamental problem in the God-human relationship. The apostle Paul cites this confession in Romans:

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,

*“That you may be justified in your words,  
and prevail when you are judged.”* (3:1–4)<sup>11</sup>

David speaks for his people (in the same letter, he is quoted as chiding Israel for their unbelief<sup>12</sup>), but the confession is part of the apostle’s larger argument that everyone is a sinner before God. After introducing the solution—Jesus Christ, a Messiah who dies in the place of God’s people and then shares his resurrection and justification before God—Paul cites David’s gratitude for receiving mercy:

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,  
and whose sins are covered;  
blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.  
(Rom. 4:7–8, citing Ps. 32:1–2)

The king now represents any sinner overwhelmed by God’s grace.

11. Occasional italics within Scripture quotations in this chapter have been added to alert readers to imbedded citations of psalms in the New Testament.

12. Rom. 11:9–10, citing Ps. 68:23.

Two moments actualized David's special relationship with God. When Saul fell out of favor with God, "Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward" (1 Sam. 16:13). This allowed God to speak through him, like an oracle, and for David to see part of God's plan. God also made a covenant with the king—namely, that one from his family would represent God's people forever (2 Sam. 7:4–16; Ps. 89:3). But after several evil descendants, David's house fell to the Babylonians (586/587 BC). Instead of losing faith in God, many looked forward to a messiah.<sup>13</sup>

## Messiah

The Hebrew word for "messiah" (*mashiah*), often translated in Greek as *christos*, which in turn is transliterated in the Bible as "Christ," occurs ten times in the Psalms.<sup>14</sup> Some claim *messiah* refers only to God's people as anointed collectively,<sup>15</sup> but we should avoid a false dichotomy. "Anointed one," the meaning of the epithet, was applied to Israel's kings and most naturally refers to a descendant who represents his people before God. Before Jesus, we find a fairly consistent messianic expectation: God "is king; he has appointed an earthly vice-regent who represents his heavenly rule on earth; the earthly vice-regent and his people travail against the rebellious of the earth."<sup>16</sup> *Psalms of Solomon*, a Jewish work that was probably completed during the reign of Herod the Great (40–4 BC), looks forward to the "Lord Christ" (*christos kyrios*, 17.32), a son of David, who fulfills God's promises to his ancestor (17.21, 24).<sup>17</sup> After ousting the Romans

13. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 516. See also William C. Pohl IV, "A Messianic Reading of Psalm 89: A Canonical and Intertextual Study," *JETS* 58, no. 3 (September 2015): 507–25.

14. See Pss. 2:2; 18:51; 20:7; 28:8; 84:10; 89:39, 52; 105:15; 132:10, 17. Jesus alludes to the final occurrence (John 5:32–35).

15. See Marko Marttila, *Collective Reinterpretation in the Psalms* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 178.

16. Michael K. Searly, *The Return of the King: Messianic Expectation in Book V of the Psalter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 1.

17. The Greek text for the citations in this paragraph is from Robert B. Wright, *The Psalms of Solomon: A Critical Edition of the Greek Text* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 176–201. James Charlesworth describes the seventeenth psalm in this collection as "the *locus classicus* for belief in a Davidic Messiah" (foreword to Wright, *Psalms of Solomon*, vii). The reading *χριστός κυρίου* in the Rahlf's edition is an unjustified emendation. The Greek and Syriac manuscripts read as nominatives (Wright, *Psalms of Solomon*, 194). See also J. Schaper, *Eschatology in the Greek Psalter*, WUNT 2/76 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 72–76.

(17.22, 24–25) and the corrupt Jewish leadership (17.36), retrieving the *diaspora*, and restoring tribal divisions (17.28), the Messiah will establish God’s kingdom as an independent state. Like David, he is a shepherd (17.40) imbued with “the spirit of holiness” (17.37). But unlike the king, he is sinless (17.36). The peoples (Gentiles) will also come (17.31, 34), although the Messiah’s relationship to these outsiders is ambiguous. He will judge them—purging “Jerusalem from Gentiles” (17.22)—but they will also come to Jerusalem to worship (see Isa. 2:1–5). He “will have Gentile peoples serving him under his yoke” (17.30). Yet the psalmist claims he “will be merciful to all the Gentiles” (17.34).

## Head

The New Testament opens with the claim that Jesus Christ (Messiah) is “son of David” (Matt. 1:1), although the relationship is complex.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, Jesus challenges the messianism of his day by distancing himself from the title (Mark 12:35–37). He avoids violence in his ministry and pursues the unrighteous outsider. As the parables teach, the kingdom of God will not conform to human expectation. Jesus anticipates the inclusion of the Gentiles (Matt. 8:5–13; John 12:20–26).

On the other hand, Jesus appropriates King David’s words and actions. The Psalms are repeated and completed in Christ.<sup>19</sup> The opening threat of accountability for the wicked (Ps. 1:5) becomes the finale of the parable of the net: “So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous” (Matt. 13:49).<sup>20</sup> They will stand before Jesus, who will use David’s words against them: “Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23, citing Ps. 6:8). But in the parable of the tenants, the first psalm’s description of “fruit in its season” is promised to God’s people: “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons” (Matt. 21:41, alluding to Ps. 1:3).<sup>21</sup> We find a similar promise through allusion in the Beatitudes:

18. Matthew intends the messianic sense (“who is called Christ,” Matt. 1:16).

19. “David’s story . . . helped shape, in no small way, the gospel conceptions of Jesus, who is presented as his messianic descendent” (Linafelt, Beal, and Camp, *Fate of King David*, xiii).

20. The allusion is recognized by the *Loci Citati Vel Allegati* in the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*.

21. This is noted in *Loci Citati Vel Allegati*.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). Earlier, David promised:

In just a little while, the wicked will be no more;  
 though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.  
 But the meek shall inherit the land  
 and delight themselves in abundant peace. (Ps. 37:10–11)

The king suffered betrayal, and Jesus applies the relevant psalm to Judas Iscariot (Ps. 41:9; John 13:18). Facing an unjust death, Jesus cries, “Now is my soul troubled” (John 12:27, citing Ps. 6:3).<sup>22</sup> In Gethsemane, he echoes a refrain that runs through the forty-second and forty-third psalms: “My soul is very sorrowful” (Mark 14:34; see Ps. 42:5, 11; 43:5). On the cross, he utters two psalms: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34, citing Ps. 22:1); “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46, citing Ps. 31:5). David’s words are actualized in two ways. The king prayed in fear of death; Jesus actually dies with the psalms on his lips. The Father does not merely respond in word but actually raises Jesus from the dead.

The Psalms are to the Gospels as they are to the story of David: they disclose the mind of the king “in the process of becoming the mind of Christ.”<sup>23</sup> David and his distant Son are united in their love for God the Father. We see this in the Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father”), which echoes David’s final prayer: “Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel *our father*, forever and ever” (1 Chron. 29:10).

## Body

In our earliest witnesses, Jesus ends the prayer he gave the disciples with “deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13). Later tradition probably added “For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen,”<sup>24</sup> in homage to David’s prayer:

22. The wording is very similar to the Old Greek: ἡ ψυχὴ μου τετάρραται // ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἐταράχθη σφόδρα (Ps. 6:4).

23. Donald Sheehan, *The Psalms of David* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), xxv.

24. “Ὅτι σου ἔστιν ἡ βασιλεία καὶ ἡ δύναμις καὶ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας. Ἀμήν. A few manuscripts simply add “Amen.” The most elaborate is from the miniscule 1253: “For yours is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.”

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and *the power* and *the glory* and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is *the kingdom*, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name. (1 Chron. 29:11–13)<sup>25</sup>

Apparently, later disciples heard the cue and strengthened the link between the two prayers. A form of the addition occurs in the Didache: “For yours is the power and the glory forever” (8.2); a prayer for the Eucharist (Communion) immediately follows: “We give you thanks, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant” (9.1).<sup>26</sup>

Identifying Jesus with David, the man who felt all things, complements the incarnation, as the author of Hebrews makes explicit:

When Christ came into the world, he said,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,  
but a body have you prepared for me;  
in burnt offerings and sin offerings  
you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,  
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” (Heb. 10:5–9, citing Ps. 40:6–8)


This bond helps explain how “in every respect” Jesus “has been tempted as we are, yet without sin,” a messianic expectation (Heb. 4:15). Christ did not rebel against God but identified with a sinful king who represented God’s people.

25. This is noted in the textual apparatus of the 28th edition of the Nestle-Aland text. See also Graham N. Squires, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8–9.

26. Acts of Paul says that “psalms of David” were recited alongside the Eucharist (9) (Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson, trans. Ernest Best, David Hill, George Ogg, G. C. Stead, and R. McL. Wilson, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964], 2:380).



For this reason, Jesus brings his disciples into the repetition of the David story:

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it  is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?” (Mark 2:23–26, alluding to 1 Sam. 21:1–6)

Jesus compared them to David’s “young men” (1 Sam. 21:4), a retinue of soldiers who shared in the crises of the king but also in his victory and blessing. The anecdote anticipates the Lord’s Supper: “And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and *gave it to them*, and said, ‘Take; this is my body’ (Mark 14:22, echoing 2:26). This action inaugurated the “new covenant,” which completed the promise God made to David (Luke 22:20).

### Augustine and Martin Luther

The close relationship between David, Jesus, and God’s people has been recognized throughout church history. Augustine and Martin Luther serve as examples.

Augustine (354–430) provides the longest Patristic commentary on the Psalms, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (“Conversations in the Psalms”). The work began as sermons in Carthage before large audiences. Augustine initially labored to isolate the voices in the Psalms but came to see their unity. The “I” of the Psalter is what he called the “whole Christ” (*totus Christus*): “The voice of Christ and His Church was well-nigh the only voice to be heard in the Psalms.”<sup>27</sup> To express this union, he appropriated Paul’s description of Jesus as the Head and the church as his body: “Everywhere diffused throughout is that man whose Head is above, and whose members are below. We ought to recognize his voice

27. “Vix est ut in Psalmis inveniamus vocem nisi Christi et Ecclesiae” (Augustine, *Exposition of Psalm 58*. See Joseph Carola, *Augustine of Hippo: The Role of the Laity in Ecclesial Reconciliation* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2005), 157–217.

in all the Psalms.”<sup>28</sup> During the siege of Hippo, the dying Augustine asked for the seven penitential psalms to be copied and hung beside his bed, so that he could read, weep, and repent.<sup>29</sup>

*The Seven Penitential Psalms* (1517, rev. 1525) was the first book Martin Luther (1483–1546) prepared for publication.<sup>30</sup> Lecturing on them at the University of Wittenberg contributed to his understanding of justification through faith alone. An Augustinian monk, Luther presumed *totus Christus*: “In the Book of Psalms,” he claimed, “we have not the life of one of the saints only, but we have the experience of Christ himself, the head of all the saints.”<sup>31</sup> Since Christ enters us in faith, we feel his “sighs and groans” in the face of temptation.<sup>32</sup>

## Psalm 2

This Davidic, Head-and-body reading can be shown in how the New Testament writers appropriate the second psalm:

Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his Anointed [*Messiah*], saying,  
“Let us burst their bonds apart  
and cast away their cords from us.”

He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the Lord holds them in derision.  
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying,

28. Augustine, *Exposition of Psalm 43*. This does not seem to be an idiosyncratic reading in Africa. Tertullian writes, “Almost all the Psalms are spoken in the person of Christ, being addressed by the Son to the Father—by Christ to God” (*omnes poene [penē] Psalmi Christi personam sustinent. —Filius ad Patrem, id est Christum ad Deum verba facientem repraesentant*). This was an especially popular quote in the nineteenth century. See, for example, George Horne, *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (James Anderson, 1822), xxv.

29. Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 11, citing Possidius, Vita S. Augustini 31 (Patrologia Latina 32.63).

30. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot, eds., *Luther's Works* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), xiv.

31. Martin Luther, *A Manual of the Book of Psalms*, trans. Henry Cole (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1837), 5.

32. Luther, *Manual*, 6. Luther emphasized a union of faith over ontology (Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007], 202).

“As for me, I have set my King  
on Zion, my holy hill.”

I will tell of the decree:  
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you.  
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.  
You shall break them with a rod of iron  
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear,  
and rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son,  
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

### **The Words of King David**

The psalm lacks an inscription in our Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, but Luke presumes that David, led by the Holy Spirit, is the speaker (Acts 4:25).<sup>33</sup> This identification is perhaps not surprising because of the king’s influence throughout the Psalms. But in the context of Luke’s presentation, Davidic authorship was the understanding of the first believers, who were taught by the apostles (Acts 2:42), who had been guided into this way of reading by Jesus after his resurrection. In the psalm, God echoes the promise he made to the king: “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (2 Sam. 7:14).<sup>34</sup>

But the content of Psalm 2 does not describe any historical moment when Israel ruled the nations.<sup>35</sup> David is not writing about himself or any of his sons before the Babylonian captivity, unless the language is not intended to be taken literally. By the time of Jesus, the second

33. Luke is also aware of its order (Acts 13:33).

34. Tremper Longman, “The Messiah: Explorations in the Law and Writings,” in *The Messiah in the New and Old Testaments*, ed. Stanley Porter (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 13–34, especially 17.

35. Longman, “The Messiah,” 18.

psalm was read messianically.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, for the first time in the Psalms, the king speaks of a “messiah,” although this is somewhat obscured by the translation “Anointed” (Ps. 2:2). The Greek translation used by the early church reads “Christ” (*christos*). So the Holy Spirit allowed David to see the salvation of God’s people in Christ, which fomented human rebellion.

When the king grew old, he nevertheless foresaw the body of Christ overcome corruption. Preaching the gospel to Gentiles at Antioch in Pisidia, Paul cites the second psalm, “You are my Son, / today I have begotten you” (Acts 13:33) and applies it to the resurrection with a link to a psalm that Peter cited to Jews at Pentecost: “You will not let your Holy One see corruption” (Acts 13:35, echoing 2:27, a citation of Ps. 16:10). Peter expresses the special reading that has occupied our study:

Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. (Act 2:29–32)

### **The Words of Jesus, Our Head**

Psalm 2 is echoed in the Father’s response to Jesus’s anointing by the Holy Spirit at his baptism:<sup>37</sup>

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit de-

36. Longman, “The Messiah,” 20. Rabbinic literature does the same (b. Sukkah 52a; Genesis Rabbah 44:8).

37. W. Davies and D. Allison conclude, “The first line of our text is from or has been influenced by Ps. 2:7 (LXX?) while the next two lines are derived from a non-LXX version of Isa. 42:1” (*The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 [London: T&T Clark, 1988], 338. See also Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 43; Rick Watts, “The Psalms in Mark’s Gospel,” in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. S. Menken (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 25–46, especially 25; Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 123; Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, “Psalms in the New Testament,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 269–80, especially 274; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 38.3; 56.14; 63.4–6; 86.3.

scending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*” (Mark 1:9–11)

So Jesus begins to repeat and complete the Davidic story. The king’s words “The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son,’” (Ps. 2:7) become his own.

However, it is important, because of the heresy of adoptionism, to point out that Jesus also uses the Psalms to distance himself from David (Mark 12:35–37). He is not bound by that designation. If we allow Jesus to hold a complex self-understanding, he is the promised Messiah, the Son of David, but more than that. The Psalms feature God speaking to God, a mystery that Jesus appropriates: “The Lord said to my Lord” (Mark 12:36). A merely human king, like David, would have to be adopted to become God’s son. But adoption language is reserved for disciples in the New Testament. Instead, throughout the Gospels, Jesus presents himself as God.

In Mark, the Father’s announcement at the Son’s baptism is immediately challenged by Satan. But immediately after calling four disciples, Jesus begins to cast out Satan’s forces.<sup>38</sup> Luke applies the second psalm to opposition from Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, and Pilate, the prefect of Rome:

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

“*Why did the Gentiles rage,  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers were gathered together,  
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—*

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever

38. Mark 1:12–28.

your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” (Act 4:23–30)

The first part of the psalm (2:1–3) describes the rebellion of the Gentiles, which the Jerusalem church interprets as being fulfilled at the cross. However, their antipathy toward the Messiah continues by their persecuting God’s people. The fullness of God’s response, the second part (2:4–12), will take place at the parousia. In the meantime, the church prays for refuge to complete her mission (Acts 4:29–30). The Father’s response is remarkable: “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Act 4:31).

Like the Gospels, Revelation brings Satan into the conflict: “And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is *to rule all the nations with a rod of iron*, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne” (Rev. 12:4–5). The vision rehearses the incarnation and ascension of Christ. In fulfillment of the second psalm, he “is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.” The woman plays the role of Mary, who also represents God’s people. When Satan can no longer harm Christ, he turns on her (Rev. 12:13).

### **The Words of God’s People, His Body**

To the prophet John the resurrected Lord Jesus says: “The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over *the nations*, and *he will rule them with a rod of iron*, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father” (Rev. 2:26–27). The focus has shifted from the Head to the body of Christ, although a union between Jesus and the disciples has been intimated in the other passages. This too is a natural interpretation of the second psalm, which moves from

an individual to the community.<sup>39</sup> Jesus promises a shared destiny: if we are willing to suffer with him, the glory of his resurrection and ascension will be ours as well. “Kiss the Son” is our exhortation to the world.

Jesus’s baptism has traditionally been understood as the formal introduction of the triune God to humanity.<sup>40</sup> Disciples are similarly baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Baptism embodies or represents our union with Christ, which brings us into God’s family. We too are “beloved” by the Father and filled with the Spirit.

The complete fulfillment of the psalm is depicted in the seventh-trumpet judgment:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our *Lord and of his Christ*, and he shall reign forever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying,

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,  
 who is and who was,  
 for you have taken your great power  
 and begun to reign.  
*The nations raged,*  
 but your *wrath* came,  
 and the time for the dead to be judged,  
 and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,  
 and those who fear your name,  
 both small and great,  
 and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”  
 (Rev. 11:15–18)

There are no longer two kingdoms, and justice is realized. The great voice and elders mark the moment.

39. David L. Peterson and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 92.

40. The Eastern church celebrates this revelation on January 6, the Feast of Epiphany, as Jacob of Serugh (ca. 451–521) notes: “At the time of the Epiphany of Christ, the Trinity appeared at the Jordan” (*On the Baptism of Christ*, cited in Robert Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 326.

## Conclusions

Disciples have read the Psalms in three overlapping yet distinct contexts: as the prayers of David, Christ (the Head), and the church (his body). Reading the Psalms with David connects the disciple to a very ancient tradition—one that predates the Greek philosophers, Buddha (ca. 563–483 BC), and Confucius (551–479 BC). (David is not a mythological hero, but a flesh-and-blood person. A stele from Tel Dan, which can be dated a little less than two centuries from the biblical account, reads “The house of David.”)<sup>41</sup> Reading with the king encourages transparency before God.

The Psalms are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Messiah. His resurrection and ascension are God’s ultimate answer to David’s prayers. Since we, the people of God, share Christ’s destiny, God has already answered all our prayers for salvation.

Reading the Psalms with Christ fosters intimacy like that of a bride and groom making a new life together for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health. As the Gospels narrate what Jesus did, we can read the Psalms to know how he felt. We can weep with David after Absalom’s betrayal as he crossed the Kidron—“And all the land wept aloud as all the people passed by, and the king crossed the brook Kidron, and all the people passed on toward the wilderness” (2 Sam. 15:23)—and with Christ, who, betrayed by Judas, took the same path on the way to the cross—“When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered” (John 18:1).<sup>42</sup> David and Jesus are *with* God’s people, and we are with them in our prayers. Our sorrow will turn to joy, and we will be together forever.

41. George Athas, “Setting the Record Straight: What Are We Making of the Tel Dan Inscription?,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 51 (2006): 241–56. Scholars debate the relationship between the “historical David” and Scripture, as they do with Christ, and the debate will continue.

42. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (xiii–xxi)* (London: Chapman, 1966), 806.