

The Horn of Salvation
Psalm 18 as a Davidic Hymn of Praise

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Religious Studies 241

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April 22, 1999

Introduction

Several Psalms receive exceptional attention from other canonical writers, from commentators in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and in the analysis of Biblical scholars over thousands of years. The eighteenth Psalm ranks near the top of this list; it is the fourth-longest canonical Psalm, it appears twice in the canon,¹ David is attested twice as its author, and it has been analyzed by a plethora of modern and ancient scholars. As yet another striking feature, Psalm 18 boasts the longest title in the Psalter and the only one attested elsewhere in the Biblical canon.² These factors alone make Psalm 18 worthy of study. Adding to its uniqueness, the Psalm is simultaneously a fluid hymn and a royal or messianic Psalm, promising God's faithfulness to "his anointed [Hebrew *messiah*], to David and his descendants forever."³ Psalm 18 presents a view of God as omnipotent and righteous, as judge, as one who concerns Himself with individuals, and as a perfect being (v. 30). The Psalm stresses monotheism, invoking the divine name, or Tetragrammaton, YHWH, a total of nineteen times between the Psalm's title and its fifty verses, along with numerous other names, to set YHWH, the God of Israel, above all other gods of the surrounding cultures. Moreover, the Psalm proclaims YHWH not only as the chief deity, but also as the sole extant deity.⁴ Thus, the Psalm itself offers praise, thanksgiving, and love to God, theology⁵ and admonitions to its readers, and information about its setting and authorship in its title. This analysis will analyze Psalm 18 as a hymn of thanksgiving and praise, attempt to locate its setting and probable authorship in ancient Israel, and draw conclusions about the Psalm's place in the canon and the liturgy of modern Judaism and Christianity.

The Question of Division

Some commentators⁶ have argued that Psalm 18 is, in fact, two separate songs: Psalm 18A, “a lament of the falsely accused,” consisting of vv. 1-30; and Psalm 18B, a “royal psalm,” consisting of vv. 31-50. There are two main arguments for this division: first, the different accounts of God’s activity in vv. 3-19 and vv. 31-45 raise the question of whether or not the Psalm is a unity, and second, the Deuteronomic tone of vv. 20ff. poses problems in the minds of some readers.⁷ That is, the arguments hold that the Psalm presents God as simultaneously active and inactive in the same redemption story, and that elements of the Psalm reflect the prevalent mentality of Deuteronomy, believed by some scholars to have been written rather late in Israel’s history, after the events it describes. These issues will be discussed further, but, for now, we consider some preliminary arguments. First, the question of the differences in God’s deliverance in the two accounts must be addressed. Here, the problem encountered is whether God delivered the psalmist from near-death, or kept him safe from danger entirely, as well as whether the psalmist was rescued by God, or saved himself through God-given strength. Much of this problem lies in v. 3, where Kraus takes issue with the Masoretic Text, which reads, “praised,”⁸ and replaces the vowels with others to form “pierced through,” which he claims is more coherent with v. 6. On the other hand, “praised” is consistent with Kraus’s translation of v. 2, which amends “I will extol you [O Yahweh]” to the beginning of v. 1, and certainly makes sense if the verse is read as in the NIV, “I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.” In any case, God’s delivery of the psalmist in vv. 16-19 is part of a theophany, also discussed below, and does not exclude any action on the part of the psalmist. In fact, vv. 34-35 imply that YHWH helps and trains, not that he is utterly absent; that is, God rescues the psalmist by enabling him to overcome his foes, and not by a purely miraculous intervention. Thus,

especially in light of the theophany and the common imagery it employs, these two parts of the Psalm can be largely reconciled.⁹

As for the second argument, there is disagreement on how significant the Deuteronomic aspects of the Psalm are and as to whether they were imposed by the original author or by later additions. This argument assumes a late composition of Deuteronomy, after or around the tenth century; an earlier composition would mean that Deuteronomic thinking would predate the tenth century, and would shed little light on when or by whom the Psalm was composed. Of course, the dating of Deuteronomy is also not certain or even agreed upon, so this argument presupposes a disputed issue. In any case, the argument based on vv. 20ff. sheds no light as to when the core of the Psalm was composed, since the Deuteronomic verses could have been inserted into an older text, so one cannot rule out either Davidic authorship or a tenth century date entirely.

Finally, Kraus presents four arguments against division: (1) the possibility of a Psalm of individual praise with two phases of narration; (2) the possibility that the Deuteronomic portions are late additions to an early core Psalm, as these portions cannot help determine the existence of such a core song; (3) the factuality of vv. 20ff. remains an open issue; and (4) the “unified parallel transmission of the entire psalm in 2 Samuel 22 urges caution.”¹⁰ The first argument simply states that the presence of two versions of the same story in a Psalm does not preclude its unity. The second case is that, while Deuteronomic elements may have been introduced to the Psalm after its composition, we cannot conclude that no early version of Psalm 18 existed which lacked these elements. The third argument, although Kraus does not elaborate explicitly on it, can be summarized as the argument that vv. 20ff. are the psalmist’s response to God’s activity: “Why, exactly, did Yahweh help me?”¹¹ The fourth point in particular suggests interpreting the Psalm as a single composition, until it can be shown otherwise. As we will argue below, there is

certainly a possibility that Psalm 18 and 2 Samuel 22 were actually recorded independently, which argues against division. Even if they were not, the fact that both accounts exist suggests that the Psalm was considered a unified text well before the canonization process, so division must not be made without extreme care. In addition to these arguments, we find striking similarities in language between the early verses of the Psalm and passages such as vv. 30-36 and vv. 46-50. That is, throughout the Psalm we find multiple references to the divine name, multiple other names for God, and metaphors for God, including “rock,” “savior,” “shield,” and “refuge,” particularly at each end. Specifically, the invocation of God in v. 3 declares, “I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies,”¹² after which the psalmist presents his account of how and why he was thus saved. Likewise, in v. 49, having finished presenting this evidence, the psalmist declares, “Therefore I will praise you among the nations, O LORD; I will sing praises to your name.”¹³ Thus, we have a declaration of God’s worthiness for praise, followed by the proof for this claim, and a conclusion, “I will praise you.” Similarly, the only two direct references to David appear in the title and in verse 50. Hence, the Psalm is contained in a double framing device; the common features of the beginning and end of the Psalm reinforce its hymnic tone and form a logical pattern of praise. Each of these four arguments and the simple fact that the Psalm is presented in both the Psalter and in 2 Samuel as a unity mandate treating Psalm 18 as a single work for the sake of analysis, and indeed for other uses, as well.

The Question of Parallel Transmission

As we have mentioned, Psalm 18 appears both in the Psalter and in 2 Samuel 22, including the title and all save one verse of the Psalm. Numerous minor differences between the

two texts appear throughout, but five variations are exceptional. In the first instance, the phrases, “For the director of music. Of David the servant of the LORD. He”, from the title, are replaced by the single word, “David”, in 2 Samuel 22:1.¹⁴ The different contexts of the two versions probably accounts for this difference; in 2 Samuel, the declaration “For the director of music” would not make sense, since the psalm falls in the middle of a long work, and simply naming David is sufficient to confer authorship. In contrast, the first phrase appears over fifty-five canonical Psalms, so it certainly does not pose a problem in Psalm 18. Indeed, the only occurrence of this dedication outside the Psalter is in Habakkuk 3:19, at the end of that book, which reads, “the Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights. For the director of music. On my stringed instruments,”¹⁵ a close parallel to Psalm 18:33. Since the book of Habakkuk is essentially a small collection of psalms with minor interjections, this verse likely refers to the entire book, a use which would not be logical in 2 Samuel 22.

In the case of the difference between Psalm 18:1 and 2 Samuel 22:2, no certain conclusions can be drawn.¹⁶ Where the Psalm reads, “I love you, O LORD, my strength,”¹⁷ there is no corresponding verse or phrase in 2 Samuel 22. Perhaps the discrepancy resulted from a copyist’s error or was a later addition; in any case, neither the presence nor the absence of the verse changes the genre of the psalm or upsets its tone. Both the Psalm and its 2 Samuel parallel function as hymns and individual praises, so this verse functions primarily as a declaration of love. That is, Psalm 18:1 makes the song more personal by establishing a clear relationship between the psalmist and God.

The third issue, the question of 2 Samuel 22:3b, which is absent in the Psalm, raises more troubling issues. Where the Psalm ends verse 2 with the words, “my stronghold,” the verse in 2

Samuel continues, “He is my stronghold, my refuge, and my savior - from violent men you save me.” The mention of “violent men” connects with verse 4, which discusses salvation from the author’s enemies, yet the verse contains a shift from third person references to God into a second person address, which the next verse immediately reverses. While this does not automatically exclude the verse as an element of the psalm as it originally existed, it casts doubt on this possibility. In any case, we will be discussing primarily the Psalm and not 2 Samuel 22, so we will focus on this verse as it is in the Psalter.

The fourth major variation, found in Psalm 18:12, is less remarkable. Where the Psalm reads, “Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced, with hailstones and bolts of lightning,” the parallel in 2 Samuel 22:13 states, “Out of the brightness of his presence bolts of lightning blazed forth.”¹⁸ This portion of the Psalm is, in fact, riddled with differences, as the two texts diverge slightly in verses 11, 12, 14, and 15. Still, the differences raise no real theological issues, nor do they seriously alter the theophany section of the Psalm - in fact, the rabbis offered no commentary on this verse in the Midrash.

Finally, Psalm 18:35 reads “You give me your shield of victory, and your right hand sustains me; you stoop down to make me great,” while 2 Samuel 22:36 omits the middle phrase.¹⁹ The image of God’s right hand is not only anthropomorphic, but can also hold messianic implications, as well, which the rabbis noted. Psalm 110:1 reads, “The Lord saith unto my lord: ‘sit thou at My right hand,’” which is understood in both the Jewish and Christian traditions as a reference to the Messiah. In the rabbinic tradition, “sustains” is here interpreted as the consolation given to Abraham, who sits at God’s left: God comforts Abraham by observing, “Thy son’s son is at My right, but I, in a manner of speaking, am at thy right.” That is, although the Messiah sits at God’s right hand, God sits at Abraham’s right hand, hence Abraham should

not be disappointed.²⁰ In contrast, Christianity, although the connection is not necessarily made with Psalm 18, understands the Messiah, or Christ, to be sustaining in and of Himself. Moreover, “you stoop down to make me great” can be understood as a reference to the incarnation of Christ, although this is not how the verse is always read. Thus, the lack of a reference to God’s hand in 2 Samuel 22:36 has some theological implications, but none which directly affect the rest of the Psalm.

The differences between the title of the Psalm and 2 Samuel 22:1 actually demonstrate a major similarity in that both give exactly the same setting in life, or *Sitz im Leben*, as well as attesting to Davidic authorship. Psalm 18 is the only canonical Psalm with such a distinction, suggesting that the title on Psalm 18 is perhaps therefore the oldest psalm title, since it appears in two canonical sources. However, this repetition could be the work of later editors or copyists of the texts, which raises a larger question: which account was composed first? There are three possibilities: the song was recorded by two different authors as an historical account in the Psalter and in 2 Samuel 22; the 2 Samuel account was recorded first and added to the Psalter later; or the Psalm was recorded first and inserted into 2 Samuel at a later date. As a starting point for such a discussion, we note the striking number of differences, mostly minor, in the two texts; twenty-one of the fifty-one verses, including the title, differ from the Psalm to 2 Samuel 22.²¹ This striking number of variations suggests more than mere copyist errors. An Israelite copying the Hebrew scriptures would have been especially careful to avoid errors; while some may be inevitable, certainly any competent scribe would be more precise than this. With this in mind, we turn to the three possibilities mentioned above. First, there is the possibility that the song was recorded first in 2 Samuel and later added to the Psalter. At first consideration, this certainly seems plausible, as the canonical Psalter appears to not have been considered closed

until rather late.²² However, this poses the above problem: why are there so many differences, if one account is merely a copy of the other? Moreover, Psalm 18:16-27a does not differ at all from the 2 Samuel text, yet this passage is surrounded by numerous verses that do so. If this passage was indeed part of the original core psalm, the lack of differences suggests that the passage and its sister are not copies of each other at all, but actually parallel accounts.²³ Furthermore, many psalms appear elsewhere in Scripture, attributed to such figures as Moses²⁴ and Hannah,²⁵ but are not found in the Psalter. Although explanations abound for why this is the case, one would question the selection of 2 Samuel 22, attributed to David, over one of the songs attributed to Moses; Psalm 90 is, in fact, attributed to Moses,²⁶ so we cannot assume that the Psalter was limited to psalms thought to be from Davidic times. None of these features support 2 Samuel 22 as the earlier text, so we rule this possibility out.

Two possibilities remain; either the Psalm was recorded first and inserted into 2 Samuel at a later period, or they represent two distinct records by two different authors. If, indeed, the 2 Samuel account is a copy of the Psalm, we have the above problem of the many differences in the text. In contrast, these differences would be expected if two individuals recorded the same song as they heard it. An improvised prayer-song of length comparable to Psalm 18 could hardly be recorded without great reliance on memory, hence two individuals would almost certainly record slight variations but with similar structure and message. This approach also helps to explain the scattered variations from the double triple meter:²⁷ a spontaneous song is far more likely to have an inconsistent rhythm than a carefully organized written poem would be. Thus, it seems likely that the original psalm was at least spontaneous, if not actually improvised aloud. Therefore, although we cannot declare this with certainty, the evidence supports the possibility of an original oral setting; while the Psalm may or may not have been written by David or in the

context given by the title, there is no basis to rule such an authorship out. We can now draw two conclusions: the Psalm most likely was written at the same time as 2 Samuel 22, based on the number and magnitude of the differences found in the two songs, combined with the degree of overall similarity. That is, neither the Psalm nor the 2 Samuel parallel represents a copy of the other, since the divergences between the two make this unlikely. Secondly, although the evidence for Davidic authorship is not exceptional, neither is there any reason to exclude its possibility; the Davidic passages within the Psalm will be discussed further below. These two theses will inform our analysis of the Psalm itself.

The Hymn of the Servant and the Rock

The title of Psalm 18 stands out as the longest title in the Psalter, as one of the most detailed, and as the only Psalm title attested elsewhere in the Biblical canon. The title tells us that the Psalm is “For the director of music. Of David the servant of the LORD. He sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said”, followed immediately by the Psalm itself. The title thus gives us a highly detailed setting in life, or *Sitz im Leben*. Further speculation on this *Sitz im Leben* has included mythical and historical possibilities. Hermann Gunkel and Hans-Joachim Kraus believe Psalm 18 to be a “festival of thanksgiving for a victory, while Schmidt saw possibilities for the Psalm as an enthronement of Yahweh, and Scandinavian interpreters found elements of the nature cult and motifs of the descent to and return from hell. Gunkel and Kraus appear to be closest; the Psalm certainly contains a victory motif and elements of thanksgiving, although it most likely was used after its composition by the Israelite congregation at large.²⁸ In addition, the title declares David to be “the servant of the LORD,” a title given him in 2 Samuel 3:18, 7:5, and

7:8. Thus, the editor who added the title to Psalm 18 must have been familiar with the rest of 2 Samuel. The use of the divine name three times in the title alone also sets apart the Psalm from the rest of the Psalter. In addition, the Psalm is recorded “For the director of music,” implying a definite cultic use at the temple and indicating that the Psalm did not reach its final form until at least after David’s designation of individuals as musicians in 1 Chronicles 25.

The first verse of the Psalm itself sets the tone for the entire piece, “I love you, O LORD, my strength.” This verse addresses the psalmist’s prayer to YHWH specifically, and establishes a pattern of metaphors for God.²⁹ The first three verses consist entirely of praise and contain seven descriptive metaphors and two names for God: “LORD” (Hebrew YHWH), “my strength,” “my rock,” “my fortress,” “my deliverer,” “my God,” “my shield,” “the horn of my salvation,” and “my stronghold.” This pattern establishes a clear relationship between psalmist and deity; the triplicate use of the divine name and the word “my” leave no doubts as to which God is involved and as to whether or not he is a personal God. This use of descriptive praise also gives a hymnic character to the Psalm, which lauds God as the protector of the oppressed and a God of strength. In addition, the verse employs the double triple meter that dominates the song. Kraus holds that this and other features of the form make the Psalm most likely closer to the original text than 2 Samuel 22, as discussed above.³⁰

The words “my rock” appear twice in verse two, setting another pattern for the rest of the Psalm: God is described as a “rock” four times in the Psalm,³¹ more than any other imagery. As Kraus observes, this is more than a metaphor, for the temple was built on the “holy rock” in Jerusalem, Mount Zion. Thus, the word “rock,” especially in connection to the words “stronghold” and “fortress,” is symbolic not only of strength and stability, but also of the presence of God in Jerusalem, the throne of justice.³² These verses also introduce the concept of

God as savior or redeemer; for example, God is “my deliverer,” the “horn of my salvation,” an image later used in Luke 1:69 of Christ. The question which remains is from whom the psalmist is delivered; since Psalm 18 throughout is presented as spoken by a kingly figure, it seems that these enemies must be enemies of the established Davidic monarchy, if not of David himself. For example, the psalmist is delivered “from the attacks of the people,” becomes the “head of nations,” and states that God gives “his king great victories; he shows unfailing kindness to his anointed.”³³ Thus, the speaker must be a ruler of the people; that is, a Davidic king. Therefore, we can conclude that these enemies are enemies of the king, if not actually Saul and David’s other enemies, as suggested by the title and 2 Samuel 22:1.

The psalmist begins the first narration of his story in vv. 4-6 with an account of his plight and his call on God. This passage bears striking resemblance to Psalm 116:3-4: “The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, save me!’”³⁴ Indeed, the early rabbis noted connections between Psalms 18 and 116, but only in connection to the “servant” idea discussed above.³⁵ However, as Kraus observes, the metaphors of “cords of death” and “torrents of perdition” are derived from the ancient Near Eastern idea of chaos and primeval waters, the same *tohu wabohu*, or “formlessness and void,” of Genesis 1:2. Thus, these images appear repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible, and the mention of them in Psalm 116 was not seen as crucial during the rabbinic debate. More importantly, but easily overlooked, the song refers to the temple in v. 6b, as well as in 2 Samuel 22:7b, indicating that the Psalm’s final form was not reached until at least the completion of the first temple in Solomon’s reign during the tenth century. This brings us back to the above discussion of the Psalm’s origins, implying that David could not have written the psalm as it exists today, yet this cannot speak to the existence of an

earlier, simpler song. That is, since David died shortly after Solomon's succession and the temple construction took seven years, he could not have referred to the temple as already extant, and certainly not at the time of Saul's death. Still, David may have been the author of the earliest form of the Psalm, to which the temple reference was later added. At the same time, the reference to the temple lends support to the implication of the title that Psalm 18 had a specific cultic importance.

In verses 7 to 15, we have a theophany, or appearance of God, which poses a number of interesting theological and textual questions. The psalmist uses powerful imagery: the mountains shake, the clouds part, YHWH mounts and rides the cherubim, and appears in brilliance with rain, hail, thunder, and lightning. The very presence of a theophany places Psalm 18 in yet another class of Psalms, the "theophany psalms" (particularly Psalms 18, 29, 50, 68, 77, 97, 144) investigated by Jorg Jeremias. Jeremias and Kraus see definite connections between these Psalms and the poetry of Israel's ancient neighbors. However, these Psalms are not clearly tied to the theophany at Sinai, nor is it likely that they were used in cultic dramas; rather, they are designed to bear witness to Yahweh and his relationship to Israel, his chosen people.³⁶ Moreover, theophanies assure individuals of God's presence and power.³⁷ Barbara Green offers commentary on this as proof of the power of prayer and God's faithfulness to His people: "One call to God, no matter how late, secures not only instant but overwhelming response: massive, manifold, millennial . . . just in time, but with the implication that the end has never been in doubt."³⁸ In contrast, Augustine saw most of this passage as metaphorical, with references to the Son of Man, knowledge, love, the law, and faith, among other concepts.³⁹ While such interpretations are certainly not unjustified, it is a simplification to read the passage as purely metaphorical; rather, the Psalm clearly depicts God's intervention as specific, historical, and

powerful. Here, the revelation of God is not merely symbolic or indirect, as in through Scripture, but made distinct and direct through God's own appearance.

The theophany continues on a more personal note in Psalm 18:16-19; God reaches down to the psalmist and rescues him from his enemies. God's actions are straightforward and direct: God personally intervenes and delivers the psalmist from his enemies, the same ones discussed above, because He "delighted" in him.⁴⁰ Moreover, we also learn that this delivery could not have been accomplished by the psalmist himself; his foes "were too strong for" him.⁴¹ The author faced overwhelming opposition, yet God redeemed him by bringing him "out into a spacious place."⁴² That is, his distress came from being in a narrow place, but God removed the dangers which had confined him. These verses certainly are applicable to David, who was nearly trapped by Saul repeatedly, and once escaped from the land of Gath by fleeing to a cave, but was saved by God's intervention.⁴³ Likewise, David was actually overpowered by Absalom, his son, who even reigned in Jerusalem briefly. Each of these features of the enemies and the psalmist's escape can be applied to David, a possible reason for the attribution of the Psalm to David in the title, as is v. 50, which will be discussed below.

Our speaker turns in vv. 20-29 to self-reflection and questioning: "why did Yahweh do this for me?" He answers both simply and completely; not only has God rewarded him for righteousness, but also for being utterly faithful and free from sin. In fact, the first half of this section is entirely devoted to stating the righteousness of the psalmist in numerous ways. Beginning in verse 25, the psalmist applies these characteristics both to himself and to God, directly addressing God and praising Him. Indeed, the LORD is "faithful," "blameless," "pure," and "shrewd," but reveals himself to each individual in different ways.⁴⁴ The image is that of a mirror: as an individual acts, so will God act towards that person. This is an interesting reversal

of the statement in Genesis 1:27 that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.”⁴⁵ Here, man reflects God, yet in the Psalm, God reflects man. Still, God holds control over the psalmist’s fate. The difference lies in God’s revelation of himself as reflecting the acts of mortals; that is, God chooses to “show” himself in each of these ways, but is not limited to them in that each attribute is merely a facet of His nature. In the case of the psalmist, God reveals Himself as strong and as a helper-savior: he preserves the “lamp” of the psalmist’s life and aids him in battle.⁴⁶

The king now turns to directly describing God and his works, which fall into three categories: perfection, uniqueness, and supportiveness. The first, God’s perfection, refers both to His “way” of acting towards His people and His “word”; that is, the Scriptures, given through Moses and the other early Israelite writers. Secondly, the God of Israel is unique; the psalmist asks, “For who is God besides the LORD [Yahweh]; And who is the Rock except our God?”⁴⁷ The reader is to understand the answer: “no one.” Moreover, we have yet another reference to God as a “rock”, in this case, as the only rock. This brings us back to the above understanding of the “rock” as Jerusalem, specifically the temple mound. To the Israelites, Mount Zion was the center and origin of creation; Yahweh, the only god capable of occupying this place as His dwelling, must be the one true God. Indeed, the midrash contains connections between creation and this verse; Hannah suggests reading “rock” (Hebrew “sur”) as “artist” (Hebrew “sayyar”), implying the creator. In contrast to human artists, God performs without normal artistic aids, and His creation praises Him, instead of the reverse.⁴⁸ Finally, God is supportive: it is He who arms, strengthens, sustains, and assists the psalmist; God raises up the speaker, making him “great.”⁴⁹ In fact, God also prevents the psalmist from encountering difficulties at all; he makes the

psalmist's way "perfect," trains him, and gives him a broad path to prevent even an injury to the ankle.⁵⁰

The psalmist now tells us what the direct results of God's action were for his enemies in vv. 37-45. Not only did the psalmist overtake his enemies, he "destroyed" them, "crushed" them, beat "them as fine as dust borne on the wind," and "poured them out like mud in the streets." God even makes these enemies bow at the king's feet in defeat and humility.⁵¹ That is, God's act of salvation is complete and plentiful. The violent tone is a direct result of the situation from which the passage arose: not only did the psalmist find himself the object of civil war, he also was the LORD's anointed; thus, he acted within reason when crushing the rebellion. Indeed, according to verse 42, the king's enemies cried to God, who did not answer. God tacitly approved of the method of victory through his inaction; indeed, it was God who prepared the psalmist for the conquest.

Finally, the king bursts with praise in verse 46, "The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God my Savior!" The final verses of the Psalm are purely hymnic; the psalmist summarizes briefly, "He is the God who avenges me, who subdues nations under me."⁵² "Therefore," he concludes "I will praise you among the nations, O LORD; I will sing praises to your name."⁵³ Finally, the psalmist refers to the ultimate sign of salvation, the messianic promise; not only does God glorify David, his anointed (Hebrew *messiah*), he glorifies the Davidic line forever, as he has promised. Indeed, the rabbis see all of the last two verses as messianic, saying, " 'I will give thanks unto Thee, O Lord, among the nations;' and at the coming of the Messiah 'will sing praises unto Thy name,' as is said 'In that day shall ye say: Praise the Lord, proclaim his name.' "⁵⁴ That is, the coming of the Messiah, not the specific grace of God towards the psalmist, is the reason for praise, although thanks are due in the

meantime. Augustine, on the other hand, sees the conclusion of the Psalm as referring not only to Christ, but also to the Father and the Church; not only does God bestow blessings and victories on Christ, his Messiah, but also on “all whom He has begotten unto eternal life their faith in the Gospel,” meaning Christians in general. Indeed, Augustine then summarizes his entire approach to Psalm 18 as follows: “Whatever words in this Psalm cannot be adapted to the Person of our Lord Himself as Head of the Church must be applied to the Church herself. For the words spoken are those of the whole Christ, of Christ united to all His members,” referring to the imagery of Christ as the head of the body of the Church, made up of the Christian believers.⁵⁵ In a manner not unlike Philo, Augustine reads most of the Psalm as allegorical, metaphorical, or simply attributable to Christ, in addition to its real, historical speaker, which is only amplified by his comments on the final verses. Thus, both traditions read the Psalm’s conclusion as highly messianic; the difference lies in the understanding of the promise’s fulfillment.

Concluding Remarks

Psalm 18 forever holds a unique place in the canon and in the Jewish and Christian traditions: unusually long, it appears twice in the Biblical canon, complete with title, and fits several categories of psalms simultaneously. While obviously a hymn of praise and thanksgiving, the Psalm is incontestably a psalm of a king, thus a “royal” or “messianic” psalm. As Jeremias noted, it is a “theophany psalm,” which contains a powerful description of God’s appearance and salvation. At the same time, the psalmist declares Yahweh to be to one and only God, the “Most High [Hebrew *El Elyon*],” the Rock, his savior, and the “horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”⁵⁶ This pervasive imagery not only proclaims the monotheism of ancient Israel as the true religion, but also itself summarizes the Psalm’s content. In ancient Mediterranean cultures, the horn, the

sole weapon of many animals, symbolized strength, power, protection, and defense. Indeed, the entire hymn focuses on God's salvation and his role as protector, defender, and strength-giver to the Davidic king. To the psalmist, God becomes real, concrete, profound, and worthy of praise; everything that God has done for him merely strengthens this relationship, not to mention the messianic promise made to the Davidic line. As we saw above, the psalmist begins with praise, explains his motivations, and concludes with a powerful, heartfelt explosion of praise and thanksgiving. Although some have argued that the psalm consists of two separate songs, this ebb and flow, combined with the textual reasons we saw above, suggests a strong unity in the Psalm. The themes are constant throughout Psalm 18: God is praised for his existence, his salvation, and his concrete presence; the psalmist humbly and lovingly exalts his base for strength, the Rock, his God. "I will praise you,"⁵⁷ declares the psalmist, for it is Yahweh who saves and trains the humble servant, Yahweh who rides the cherubim, the guardians of holiness,⁵⁸ Yahweh who shakes the mountains, and Yahweh who triumphs over all, in response to the prayers and petitions of his servant.

Appendix: Psalm 18 and 2 Samuel 22⁵⁹

Psalm 18

For the director of music. Of David the servant of the LORD. He sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said:

¹*I love you, O LORD, my strength.*

²The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.
He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

³I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise,
and I am saved from my enemies.

⁴The *cords of death* entangled me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.

⁵The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me.

⁶In my distress I called to the LORD;
I cried to my God for help.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry *came before him, into his ears.*

⁷The earth trembled and quaked,
and the foundations of the mountains shook;
they trembled because he was angry.

⁸Smoke rose from his nostrils;
consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it.

⁹He parted the heavens and came down;
dark clouds were under his feet.

¹⁰He mounted the cherubim and flew;
He soared on the wings of the wind.

¹¹He made darkness *his covering*, his canopy around him -
the dark rain clouds of the sky.

2 Samuel 22

¹*David sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. ²He said:*

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;

³my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield and the horn of my salvation.
*He is my stronghold, my refuge, and my savior-
from violent men you save me.*

⁴I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise,
and I am saved from my enemies.

⁵The *waves of death* swirled about me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.

⁶The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me.

⁷In my distress I called to the LORD;
I called out to my God.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came to his ears.

⁸The earth trembled and quaked,
the foundations of the *heavens* shook;
they trembled because he was angry.

⁹Smoke rose from his nostrils;
consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it.

¹⁰He parted the heavens and came down;
dark clouds were under his feet.

¹¹He mounted the cherubim and flew;
He soared on the wings of the wind.

¹²He made darkness his canopy around him -
the dark rain clouds of the sky.

¹²Out of the brightness of his presence *clouds advanced,*
with hailstones and bolts of lightning.

¹³The LORD thundered from heaven;
 the voice of the Most High resounded.

¹⁴He shot *his* arrows and scattered the enemies,
great bolts of lightning and routed them.

¹⁵The valleys of the seas were exposed
 and the foundations of the earth laid bare
 at *your rebuke, O LORD*, at the blast of
 breath from *your* nostrils.

¹⁶He reached down from on high and took hold
 of me;
 he drew me out of deep waters.

¹⁷He rescued me from my powerful enemy,
 from my foes, who were too strong for
 me.

¹⁸They confronted me in the day of my disaster,
 but the LORD was my support.

¹⁹He brought me out into a spacious place;
 he rescued me because he delighted in
 me.

²⁰The LORD has dealt with me according to my
 righteousness;
 according to the cleanness of my hands
 he has rewarded me.

²¹For I have kept the ways of the LORD;
 I have not done evil by turning from my
 God.

²²All his laws are before me;
 I have not turned away from his decrees.

²³I have been blameless before him and have
 kept myself from sin.

²⁴The LORD has rewarded me according to my
 righteousness,
 according to the cleanness of my hands
 in his sight.

²⁵To the faithful you show yourself faithful,
 to the blameless you show yourself
 blameless,

²⁶to the pure you show yourself pure,
 but to the crooked you show yourself
 shrewd.

¹³Out of the brightness of his presence *bolts of lightning blazed forth.*

¹⁴The LORD thundered from heaven;
 the voice of the Most High resounded.

¹⁵He shot arrows and scattered the enemies,
 bolts of lightning and routed them.

¹⁶The valleys of the seas were exposed
 and the foundations of the earth laid bare
 at *the rebuke of the LORD*, at the blast of
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 from my foes, who were too strong for
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²⁵The LORD has rewarded me according to my
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 according to the cleanness of my hands
 in his sight.

²⁶To the faithful you show yourself faithful,
 to the blameless you show yourself
 blameless,

²⁷to the pure you show yourself pure,
 but to the crooked you show yourself
 shrewd.

²⁷You save the humble
but *bring low those whose eyes are*
haughty.

²⁸You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning;
my God turns my darkness into light.

²⁹With your help I can advance against a troop;
with my God I can scale a wall.

³⁰As for God, his way is perfect;
the word of the LORD is flawless.
He is a shield for all who take refuge in him.

³¹For who is God besides the LORD?
And who is the Rock except our God?

³²It is God who arms me with strength
and makes my way perfect.

³³He makes my feet like the feet of a deer;
he enables me to stand on the heights.

³⁴He trains my hands for battle;
my arms can bend a bow of bronze.

³⁵You give me your shield of victory,
and your right hand sustains me;
you stoop down to make me great.

³⁶You broaden the path beneath me,
so that my ankles do not turn.

³⁷I pursued my enemies and *overtook* them;
I did not turn back until they were
destroyed.

³⁸I crushed them *so that* they could not rise;

they fell beneath my feet.

³⁹You armed me with strength for battle;
you made my adversaries bow at my feet.

⁴⁰You made my enemies turn their backs in
flight,
and I destroyed my foes.

⁴¹They cried for help, but there was no one to
save them -
to the LORD, but he did not answer.

⁴²I beat them as fine as *dust borne on the wind;*
I poured them out like mud in the streets.

²⁸You save the humble,
but your eyes are on the haughty to bring
them low.

²⁹You *are my lamp, O LORD;*
the LORD turns my darkness into light.

³⁰With your help I can advance against a troop;
with my God I can scale a wall.

³¹As for God, his way is perfect;
the word of the LORD is flawless.
He is a shield for all who take refuge in him.

³²For who is God besides the LORD?
And who is the Rock except our God?

³³It is God who arms me with strength
and makes my way perfect.

³⁴He makes my feet like the feet of a deer;
he enables me to stand on the heights.

³⁵He trains my hands for battle;
my arms can bend a bow of bronze.

³⁶You give me your shield of victory;

you stoop down to make me great.

³⁷You broaden the path beneath me,
so that my ankles do not turn.

³⁸I pursued my enemies and *crushed* them;
I did not turn back until they were
destroyed.

³⁹I crushed them *completely, and* they could not
rise;
they fell beneath my feet.

⁴⁰You armed me with strength for battle;
you made my adversaries bow at my feet.

⁴¹You made my enemies turn their backs in
flight,
and I destroyed my foes.

⁴²They cried for help, but there was no one to
save them -
to the LORD, but he did not answer.

⁴³I beat them as fine as *the dust of the earth;*
I pounded and trampled them like mud in
the streets.

⁴³You have delivered me from the attacks of *the*
people;
you have *made* me the head of nations;
people I do not know are subject to me.

⁴⁴As soon as they hear me, they obey me;
foreigners cringe before me.

⁴⁵They all lose heart;
they come trembling from their
strongholds.

⁴⁶The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock!
Exalted be God my Savior!

⁴⁷He is the God who avenges me,
who *subdues* nations under me,

⁴⁸who *saves* me from my enemies.
You exalted me above my foes;
from violent men you rescued me.

⁴⁹Therefore I will praise you among the nations,
O LORD;

I will sing praises to your name.

⁵⁰He gives his king great victories;
he shows unfailing kindness to his
anointed,
to David and his descendants forever.

⁴⁴You have delivered me from the attacks of *my*
people;
you have *preserved* me *as* the head of
nations;
people I do not know are subject to me,

⁴⁵*and foreigners come cringing to me;*
as soon as they hear me, they obey me.

⁴⁶They all lose heart;
they come trembling from their
strongholds.

⁴⁷The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock!
Exalted be God, *the Rock*, my Savior!

⁴⁸He is the God who avenges me,
who *puts the* nations under me,

⁴⁹who *sets me free* from my enemies.
You exalted me above my foes;
from violent men you rescued me.

⁵⁰Therefore I will praise you among the nations,
O LORD;

I will sing praises to your name.

⁵¹He gives his king great victories;
he shows unfailing kindness to his
anointed,
to David and his descendants forever.

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Notes

¹ The Psalm and 2 Samuel 22 are nearly identical. Both texts are given in their entireties in the appendix for comparison, and the texts will be compared later in the discussion.

² 2 Samuel 22:1 is nearly identical.

³ Ps. 18:50 NIV. Ps. 18:50 is quoted by Paul in Romans 15:9 as referring to Christ. From the Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition, New International Version. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994. Scripture throughout is taken from the NIV.

⁴ Ps. 18:31, 41.

⁵ Actually, the Hebrew contains no word for “theology”, as there was no need for a theology in a people among whom God dwells. None the less, that is what it contains.

⁶ H. Schmidt and E. Baumann (in his “Strukturuntersuchungen im Psalter I”), among others, argue for this division. See: Kraus, Hans-Joachim. Psalms 1-59: A Continental Commentary. Trans. Hilton C. Oswald. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993

⁷ Kraus, Psalms, 256. Kraus holds the opinion that a division is dubious, and presents these two arguments as those upon which a division is “always based.”

⁸ The rabbis were puzzled by this, as well. Rabbi Yudan even suggested transposing the two halves of the verse to make sense of it. See Midrash on the Psalms, The. Trans. William G. Braude. Leon Nemoy et al, Eds. New Haven: Yale UP, 1976. v. XII. pp. 237-8.

⁹ Kraus, Psalms, 256.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹² Ps. 18:3 NIV.

¹³ Ps. 18:49 NIV.

¹⁴ 2 Sam. 22:1 and Ps. 18:Title NIV.

¹⁵ Hab. 3:19 NIV.

¹⁶ In fact, I found no commentary at all on this fact, from either tradition.

¹⁷ Ps. 18:1 NIV.

¹⁸ Ps. 18:12 and 2 Sam. 22:13 NIV.

¹⁹ Ps. 18:35 and 2 Sam. 22:36 NIV - see appendix.

²⁰ Midrash, 260.

²¹ They are: Ps. 18: Title, 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 11, 12, 14, 15, 28, 29, 35, 37, 38, 42, 43, 44, 46, 47, and 48.

²² The Dead Sea scrolls, for example, and specifically the scroll 11QPs^a, contain several different arrangements of the Psalms, and even include in the Psalms several texts outside the canon. These documents, written between 200 BC and 70 AD, suggest the possibility of several different Psalters in use, possibly as late as the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus, there is no reason to assume that the Psalter was considered “closed” before 2 Samuel was completed.

²³ The alternative explanation is that a second editor amended any differences between Psalm 18:16-27a and its sister passage, but not elsewhere in the Psalm, which seems highly unlikely. Thus, these passages were either part of the earliest form of the psalm or were both added by a later author, who copied the addition perfectly. Again, tough, there is no explanation for the variations left by this individual.

²⁴ Exodus 15 (the “Song at the Sea”) and Deuteronomy 32 (Moses’ death song).

²⁵ 1 Sam. 2:1-10 is Hannah’s prayer for a son.

²⁶ Ps. 90:Title (NIV) reads, “A prayer of Moses the man of God.”

²⁷ According to Kraus, these occur in vv. 7, 8, 25, 30, 34, 35, 48, 49, and 50, and are mostly the result of “additions (glosses).” That is, flourishes added either by later editors or by a singer of the Psalm. Kraus, Psalms, 256.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 257-8.

²⁹ This is the only full verse in Psalm 18 not found in 2 Samuel 22. See Appendix.

³⁰ Krause, Psalms, 256.

³¹ Vv. 2, 31, 46. “Rock” also appears a fifth time in 2 Sam. 22:47b, mirroring 2 Sam. 22:3.

³² Kraus, Hans-Joachim. The Theology of the Psalms. Trans. Keith Crim. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986. p. 31.

³³ Ps. 18: 43, 47, and 50.

³⁴ Ps. 116:3-4 NIV.

- ³⁵ Midrash, 232. Ps. 116:16, attributed to David, proclaims “O LORD, truly I am thy servant, I am thy servant.”
- ³⁶ Kraus, Theology, 38.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.
- ³⁸ Green, Barbara. Like a Tree Planted. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997. p. 75.
- ³⁹ Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. St. Augustine on the Psalms. Trans. Dame Scholastica Hegbin and Dame Felicitas Corrigan. Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1960. v. 1. pp. 167-9.
- ⁴⁰ Ps. 18:19 NIV.
- ⁴¹ Ps. 18:17 NIV.
- ⁴² Ps. 18:19 NIV.
- ⁴³ 1 Sam. 23:9-13, 21:10-22:1 NIV.
- ⁴⁴ Ps. 18:25-6 NIV.
- ⁴⁵ Gen. 1:27 NIV.
- ⁴⁶ Ps. 18:28 NIV.
- ⁴⁷ Ps. 18:31 NIV.
- ⁴⁸ Midrash, 257-8.
- ⁴⁹ Ps. 18:35. Various translations differ widely here as to what makes the psalmist “great”: the Masoretic Text reads : ZYHD, “your humility,” which Kraus translates as “your encouragement” (Psalms, 254), Green translates as “your might” (77), Augustine reads as “thy discipline” (173), and Braude translates as “Thy gentleness” (Midrash, 259). The NIV reads, “you stoop down to make me great.” The literal reading, “Your humility makes me great,” is perhaps not the contextual meaning of the verse, but is certainly interesting theologically, especially in Christian exegesis. In any case, God lovingly elevates the psalmist, and does so personally.
- ⁵⁰ Ps. 18:32, 34, 36 NIV, respectively.
- ⁵¹ Ps. 18:37, 38, 42, 39 NIV.
- ⁵² Ps. 18:47 NIV.
- ⁵³ Ps. 18:49 NIV.
- ⁵⁴ Midrash, 169. Scripture quoted: Psalm 18:50, *Ibid.*, Isaiah 12:4.
- ⁵⁵ Augustine, 177.
- ⁵⁶ Ps. 18:2 NIV.
- ⁵⁷ Ps. 18:49 NIV.
- ⁵⁸ Cherubim guard Eden after the fall in Genesis 3:23, the Ark of the Covenant, and the appearance of God in Ezekiel 1.
- ⁵⁹ Both texts are from the New International Version. Italics are added to indicate differences between the texts. Where the divine name “YHWH” appears in the Hebrew, LORD is used in this translation.